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University of Alberta

Kary's Story

by

Kim Aippersbach

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 1990

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Submitted by: Kim Aippersbach

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in English

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A E Altmann
A. Altmann

June [illegible]

To

Kami, Kelli, and Krista

Abstract

Kary Hill is twelve years old and still reads fairy tales, along with anything else she can get her hands on. Her life is hardly a fairy tale, however. Her sister thinks she's weird, her parents are concerned about her, and her schoolmates avoid her like the plague. What is wrong with her? To top it all off, her favorite brother, the only one who ever understood her, has left home, leaving her even more alone and outcast. In her attempts to escape from her problems into the world of books and imagination, Kary rediscovers her talent for writing. The beautiful fairy-tale world of Caralisle becomes her refuge from the confusions of growing up, but it is not an escape. As Kary struggles to create Caralisle in writing, she finds she is creating herself. Just when she begins to feel more comfortable with her place in the world, she is forced to make a decision that requires all the courage of a fairy tale hero. How she resolves her own conflict, as well as that of her main character, shows how much she has learned about life and fairy tales. It is not without difficulty that both stories are brought to their happily-ever-after endings.

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Prologue

Once upon a time, in the lovely, far-off land of Caralisle, there lived a King and Queen, King Arman and Queen Quelce. They had a beautiful, chestnut-haired daughter named Tatania. Tatania was the youngest of five daughters, all of whom were beautiful, but she was the loveliest, most graceful and kindest of them all. Because of her beauty, princes and peasants from every surrounding country were constantly at the palace, begging for her hand in marriage. The kind-hearted young maiden couldn't choose one above all the rest, so all her suitors were turned away.

Unfortunately, her beauty had also caught the eye of a jealous witch, who considered herself to be the fairest in the land. To get rid of her unwanted competition, the sorceress whisked away the unlucky princess in her chariot of ice and locked her in a stone tower deep in the murky Swamp of Sinmole.

"Hey, Kare, is that my story you're writing?"

The brown-haired girl at the desk turned around with a happy smile to greet her older brother. "You can't read it yet; I just barely started it."

"Has it got a princess and a witch and a tower in it?"

"Yup."

"Well then, it can't help but be good. Can we interrupt the creative genius long enough to go eat supper?"

"Sure. I don't know what's going to happen next, anyway." She got up from her chair just as their mother called.

"Kary, Brian! Come for dinner."

"Coming!" they yelled together, then laughed at each other.

When they arrived in the kitchen, warm sunlight was streaming through the window, turning the table and the plates and glasses and Megan and Mom and Dad into gold.

"It's like Midas!" Kary cried as she slipped into her place at the table and turned into gold like everyone else. "It's just like a fairy tale."

Her mother laughed at her. "Everything's a fairy tale to you, Kary."

"She'll grow out of it eventually," her father commented.

Brian winked at her. "I certainly hope not," he said.

Chapter 1 -- The Tree

"Are you reading again, Kary? That's all you ever do!" Megan breezed through the living room, friend in tow, not even pausing as she delivered her exclamation. Kary looked up to give her older sister a nasty look, but she was already in the kitchen, clattering around the cupboards.

"What do you want to drink, Michelle? Orange juice, lemonade, Coke?"

Kary slumped further down into the chesterfield cushions and kept reading, but Megan was being particularly loud.

"You wouldn't believe what happened to me today! It was the most incredible thing!"

Deciding finally that her bed would be just as comfortable as the chesterfield, Kary held her place in her book with her finger and stomped upstairs.

"This incredibly good-looking guy was just standing there in the hallway by my locker, . . . "

Kary slammed her bedroom door, flopped onto her bed and started reading again. But her mind still rankled with bitterness, and she couldn't concentrate on the page in front of her.

Why does she have to be such a snot? she demanded silently. Megan had been getting more and more sarcastic and cutting of late, especially when her friends were around, as if she didn't want to own Kary as her sister. *I haven't done anything to deserve this. Besides, if I spend all my time reading it's just because Megan never wants to do anything any more. It's always her friends this, her friends that . . . and they're all such boring snits.*

Kary sat up on her bed and stared out her bedroom window. The late afternoon sun was streaming through, setting dust motes dancing in the air above the bed. Outside, between the house and the two poplars that stood guard at the corners of the yard, the air seemed to shimmer and flow with sunlight. A ray of sun was just gilding the top of the mountain ash tree in the middle of the yard; it looked like a young king, newly crowned, standing before his courtiers (the bushes along the fence) and men-at-arms (the poplars).

Kary forgot herself in imagining the scene: the willow standing in the shadows near the house was the new king's bride, waiting to join her royal spouse for the coronation procession. And the gnarled old crab apple, laden with sour fruit, was the plotting witch, who would soon cast a spell on the strong young man who stood so proudly in the last rays of the sun. As if in fulfillment of Kary's prediction, the sun moved a fraction further downward and shadow swallowed the mountain ash. Kary laughed at herself. With the magic beam of light gone, the tree became a tree once again, beautiful and full and laden with bright red berries, but still only a tree.

Kary returned to her book with a sigh of resignation, for the sunlight had not answered her questions, only pushed them again to the back of her mind. The plot soon had her in its grip; she was far away in a boarding school in London, suffering along with the heroine in her cold attic room, and Megan, the annoyance, and the good-looking guy were all forgotten. It only seemed a few moments later when she heard her mother's voice calling.

"Kary! Kary! Where are you?"

"I'm in my bedroom!"

"Could you come downstairs and help me fix dinner!"

"Do I have to?"

"Do you want dinner?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" She threw the book on her bed and stomped back downstairs. "Why can't Megan help?"

"I'm going to Michelle's for dinner," Megan called on her way out the door.

"Humph," muttered Kary.

"Can you unload the dishwasher for me? Your Dad should be home any minute now, and the table still isn't set."

Kary moped into the kitchen and began to put the dishes away.

"I'm home!" called her father from the front door. He walked into the kitchen loosening his tie.

"How was your day?" asked her mother.

"Not bad."

"Supper's almost ready."

"Oh good. I'll go wash up."

Kary sorted the silverware into the drawer and began to daydream. *I am a kitchen maid in -- no, not a boarding school; that's been done -- in the castle of a great Scottish clan chief,* she thought to herself. *The steward has just come down from the great hall where a banquet was served, and the cook will now prepare a supper for us out of the banquet leftovers. I am the lowest of all the servants, so I must scrub the pots and polish the silverware.*

Her father returned to the kitchen. "What's for dinner?"

"Pork chops. Kary, can you set the table now?"

"Good: real food. Hi, Kary."

"Hi, Dad."

"What was that supposed to mean?" her mother demanded, turning from the sink.

"Just a joke. Ha, ha?"

Her mother went back to peeling carrots in silence, and her father shook his head and went into the living room.

The cook and the steward are spatting, as usual, Kary continued to herself as she laid out the plates. *Spatting? Having a spat? Wonder how you use that word. Oh well. I ignore them, for I am only interested in hearing news of the young lord, the clan chief's only son and heir. He left yesterday to lead his father's soldiers against the neighboring clan, and my heart is sick with worry, for secretly I love him. My love is unrequited, of* *course, for why would a lord such as he even notice a low scullery maid such as myself. But I cannot help loving him, and now I want desperately to know if he is still alive .*

"Dinner's ready!" called her mother. "Kary, can you carry this to the table?"

As we gather around the old wooden table to eat our meagre meal, the talk turns to the events of the day.

"So, how did the staff meeting go today," her mother asked as her father started eating.

"Better than I expected," he replied.

My heart leaps within me: the first battle is won, and young lord, um, Donald, no makes him sound like a duck; how about Andrew? probably not Scottish, but it'll do. Young lord Andrew is still alive. Nothing else matters now; I can eat my meagre meal in peace .

"So how was your first day of junior high school, Kary?" asked her father.

"Hmm? Oh!" The leftover haggis and scones Kary had been peacefully eating turned abruptly back into pork chops and mashed potatoes. "That's not until tomorrow. Today was just registration day for anyone who didn't register by mail."

"Oh, I see."

This is getting boring. Perhaps the scullery maid can dress up as a boy and join the army. Yes. Then she can save the prince's life in battle, and, . . . oh, I don't know.

"Is there anything for dessert?" her father asked.

"How does chocolate cake sound?"

"Great! Kary?"

"Sure, I'll have some."

"Can you clear the table while I serve the cake?"

"All right."

So the Scottish kitchen maid chewed her dry crusts of bread, washed all the banquet dishes, polished the pewter, scrubbed the floor, and then joined the cook and the steward in the family room to watch TV.

Later, Megan came home from her friend's house, full of giddiness and self-importance. She chattered on about what Michelle did over the holidays, and about what the two of them were going to do in school this year, because they were going to the same high school, along with a whole group of friends who were just going to have a great time, even though two of their teachers were going to be horrible, but the Phys. Ed. teacher was supposed to be really nice, and the Biology teacher was gorgeous, so they were going to do an extra project in Biology, just to see him more often.

"That's hardly a good reason to do a Biology project," commented their mother laughingly when Megan stopped for a breath of air. Kary rolled her eyes and got up to leave the room. She couldn't take much more of this.

"Oh, Kary, you left your bike outside," Megan said as Kary passed her.

"Kary! How many times do I have to tell you to put your bike away? One of these days it's going to get stolen, and you won't be able to say I didn't warn you."

Megan leaves hers out just as often as I do. I just don't tell on her.

"Kary?"

"I'm going, I'm going." She slammed the door behind her and took a deep, angry breath of the cool, dark air. "It's not as if anyone would ever steal *my* bike," she muttered as she walked over to the vehicle in question. "It's so old and rusty no one would want it. No offence, Star," she added, addressing the bike as she raised its kick stand and wheeled it around to the back yard. "You've always been a trusty steed. It just makes me so angry when everyone picks on me. Megan's perfect, of course. She never does anything wrong. Now that Brian's gone, it's me that gets it."

She opened the shed door and lifted the bike inside. Now that she had vented her frustration she felt a little better, and she stood by the shed, looking up at the stars. *Why do things have to change?* she wondered, feeling as though she was looking down at herself from a great height, seeing all the events of the past year as if they were in a painting. *First Brian left, and Dad got all stern and silent and Mom got depressed. But that was okay after a while, because me and Megan stuck together, and things sort of got back to normal eventually. But now Megan's all different, and Mom thinks it's great because she's "growing up", but I think it's awful. And tomorrow I have to start in a new school, where I won't know anyone, and Dad wants me to be a genius and Mom wants me to be popular, and I don't know what I want.*

She wandered over to the mountain ash tree that had seemed so kingly in the evening sunlight. It rustled with gentle tree-like sounds, as if it were trying to tell her something, but she couldn't understand.

Brian knew what he wanted to do, and he went ahead and did it. Nothing could stop him, not Mom or Dad, not his friends, not his teachers. He took his keyboard and his guitar, and rode off into the night, never to return again, like some wandering minstrel, or some fairy tale hero off to seek his fortune. It made it a bit easier to think of his leaving that way, instead of the way everyone else saw it: a foolish, thoughtless 17 year old dropping out of high school and leaving home to join a band. *No one took him seriously, except me. I believed in him.*

The tree rustled sympathetically. Suddenly Kary remembered the evening, almost a year ago, when she had stood out here crying with sorrow and anger while inside the house her father raged and her mother sobbed. Brian had just left the night before, and she had wanted to show her solidarity with him somehow, when everyone else was condemning him. Remembering the fairy tale of two brothers who parted ways to seek their fortunes, she had taken an old pocket knife of Brian's and come out to the tree. In the tale, the brothers had thrust a knife into a tree, and as long as both brothers were safe the knife stayed shiny. When one brother was in danger of losing his life, the other brother knew because one side of the knife was rusted, and he rushed off to the rescue.

Kary went to the tree and felt up and down its trunk. There it was. A year later, the knife she had stuck into the tree was still sticking there, unnoticed. Kary laughed at her childishness, but a part of her still felt a tremor of anxiety to know the fate of the knife, so she pulled it out. It was completely rusted away. *Well, it's not as if I ever really believed in it. It's not as if it means anything.* But she felt as if her last hope had just crumbled, and there was nothing left to believe in.

Chapter 2 -- The Forest

Harvey Johnson Junior High School was huge and brown. No, worse than brown: puce. Kary's mother had a pair of shoes she called "puce", and Kary thought it was one of the most disgusting colors possible. *Puce*, she thought with satisfaction as she stood at the end of the school yard regarding her new school; then she began running. The warning bell was ringing, and she was going to be late.

Opening the nearest door to Harvey Johnson Junior High School, Kary found herself at the beginning of a dim, puce hallway that stretched out endlessly before her. A few kids were slamming locker doors and dashing off down myriad side corridors to their classrooms, but everyone else was already hidden away behind the countless, identical puce doors.

503, Kary thought to herself weakly; *where's room 503?* She happened to have entered the 400-wing of the building, and all the doors bore tantalizingly close numbers like 480, 495, 479, but the further along the hall she went the further from 500 the numbers got. Turning down a side hallway, she found herself in the 200-wing.

Help, she cried silently. *I'm lost. I'll never find my room.* The late bell rang. Finally she found a teacher who gave her directions, and she set off running down the hall.

"No running in the halls!" the teacher called out after her.

She was at least five minutes late by the time she got to room 503, and through the window in the door she could see the teacher talking to the class. Opening the door as quietly as she could, she tried to slip inconspicuously into a seat at the back.

"Nice of you to join us this morning," the teacher said. The class giggled. Kary froze. "I've just been rehearsing the rules of the class to your fellow students. You'll have to ask one of them for a copy, as I'm not going to repeat myself. Don't just stand there--there are plenty of free seats left. As soon as you're ready I'll proceed with roll call."

All eyes were upon Kary as she slunk into the nearest chair and pulled her notebook from her bag. Directly in front of her she could see "Hell's Angels" scrawled on the back of a jean jacket. *This is not going to be a good day,* she thought to herself. In the opposite corner of the room a group of girls with a seemingly endless supply of hair and conversation were continuing the whispering they had begun when the teacher turned her attention to Kary. Now the teacher was looking for something on her desk, and more whispers sprang up. Kary felt foolish and out of place. She also felt hot and sticky, and wished she could go to the bathroom to wash her hands.

"Are we ready for roll call? Please answer 'here' when your name is called." The teacher paused, looking around the class. "Could I please have everyone's attention," she said, in the iciest voice imaginable. The girls with the hair condescended to look up. "Thank you. Now we can begin. Angela Armstrong."

"Here."

"Roger Baily."

"Here."

Kary wished herself a thousand miles away; no, a thousand light-years. *This isn't Harvey Johnson Junior High School,* she imagined. *This is a Training Center for new colonists on the planet, um, Alpha Five. Yes, Alpha Five, the fifth planet circling Alpha Centari, and the first remotely habitable planet our explorations have discovered. I am here with the other colonists from Earth to learn about the hazards and dangers of this new planet we will soon call home.*

"Don Galbraith."

"Here."

"Sheila Grant."

"Here."

The walls of the classroom form a three-dimensional screen all around us on which are projected scenes from the various areas of the planet . It is a desert planet, without oceans, lakes, rivers or clouds. We view endless burning sands, lifeless ridges of rock, *bleached bones of hapless animals scattered across the dunes, and our hearts sink within us at the task that lies ahead.*

"Roger Halworth."

"Yeah," said the Hell's Angels jacket.

Although the Training Center is climate-controlled, the fierce heat of the foreign sun beats down through the plastic dome, and we realize that we will never be cool again.

"Kary Hill."

The heat is unbearable, and I feel faint.

"Kary Hill," louder this time.

Kary started out of her reverie. "Here," she said in a small voice.

The teacher looked up from the roll and located the owner of the small voice. She raised her eyebrows upon discovering it was Kary. "Any relation to Brian Hill?" she asked.

"He's my brother."

The teacher gave her an appraising look, and then went back to the roll. Kary's ears were burning: *So much for being inconspicuous. Now all I can hope for is that no one knows about Brian. Who is this teacher, anyway?*

"My name is Mrs. Richards, and I will be teaching you mathematics this year. Welcome to Junior High School."

Welcome to my nightmare is more like it, Kary thought to herself. *You're Brian's old math teacher, and he hated you. I should have recognized you at once. I bet you want to know if I'm anything like my brother. Well I am. And if that means I'll fail math too, then fine with me.* She envisioned a dramatic scene: *The heroine stood before her tormenter, eyes flashing with defiance. "You can't break me. I'll never like math. Never!" "You'll fail," threatened the witch in a low, menacing voice. "I don't care!" replied the heroine, tossing her head proudly.*

"Please get out a pencil and eraser and prepare to write a pretest."

The heroine winced, and her head fell despairingly into her hands.

Kary was right. It was not a good day. She felt completely lost in this sea of unfamiliar faces, with no point of reference. People she had known from elementary school had turned into strangers over the summer, and no one acknowledged her. It might have been all right if she could have remained merely faceless, but all day long she found herself labeled as Brian's sister, or Megan's sister, or even Mr. Hill's daughter, because her father was vice-principal of the elementary school. All the teachers recognized her, and all the students, it seemed, had heard of someone in her family. But no one knew her.

"Who does that Kary Hill think she is, anyway?" she overheard one girl in her class say to another in the hallway. "School celebrity or what? Geesh!"

"Teacher's pet is more like it," replied the other girl.

Kary stared into her empty locker as the voices faded down the hallway.

"Her brother dropped out of school, did you know?"

"Oh, is that the one. I heard someone say . . . "

The hallway became quiet. Kary slammed her locker shut and left the school, walking home with quick, angry strides.

Who does that Kary Hill think she is? Well, it would be nice if someone would ask me instead of making it up for me. Then she laughed, picturing someone coming up to her and asking, *"So, Kary Hill, who are you, anyway? " Well, that's a very good question. Let's see. Besides being Brian Hill's sister, you mean. Yes, well . . .* Her pace slowed as she pantomimed a thoughtful look. *I am 12 years old. I like reading; I hate gym, but I like swimming, and biking, and skiing and skating. I love raspberries and hate walnuts. I play the piano because I used to have to take lessons, and I sing when no one can hear me. I . . . hmm. I don't have a lot of hobbies, besides reading.*

She stopped. Ahead of her the street came to a dead end at the edge of a ravine. A paved bike path went along the top of the ravine, and if she turned right on it she would come to the bridge that crossed over into her neighborhood. But, on the other side of the path, a steep slope covered with grasses and low bushes, full of flowers, led down to where tall, slender trees crowded together smelling of sunlight and earth. Kary Hill took a deep breath of the resonant air.

"And, I like trees," she said aloud, jumping over the path and half-walking, half-sliding down the slope until she got among the trees and could use their trunks as support. She had never been in the ravine before; she had never been allowed to go near it. Feeling very daring and free she swung around a tree and surveyed the new territory. The smell that first struck her continued to assail her even as she noticed and wondered at the mottled light beneath the leaves, the quiet hum of bees, the tiny crackling sounds of small animals slipping away through the undergrowth. It smelled like life.

Kary wandered down through the trees, finding random pathways around their trunks, discovering the curved and pointed shapes of leaves and the muted colors of flowers and the rough, warm feel of bark beneath her fingers. The woods were a glorious mystery unravelling itself before her. She felt as if she were waking up from a long, hazy sleep, to discover a glowing, beckoning world.

"I'm alive!" she called out suddenly. "I am Kary Hill, and I am alive."

She was also not alone. A louder cracking of twigs from the other side of the ravine alerted her to the sight of a boy in jeans and a rusty colored sweatshirt scrambling up the slope. He was too far away for her to see who it was, but she knew it must be someone from school. Who else would be here?

Hoping he hadn't heard her cry out, she continued down the hill, but the sight of another human being had broken the spell of mystery and wonder. The woods were only a few trees growing at the bottom of a gully; as she got closer to the creek at the bottom she began to smell its oily stagnation, and her thoughts couldn't help returning to school and frustration.

"I don't belong there," she said to a startled bird who flew away with a squawk. *I don't belong anywhere. I can see why Brian ran away.*

Staring down at the brown water that trickled slowly from one pool to another she wondered how she was going to make it through the year.

Oh Brian. Come back and take me with you, please. You're my only hope. You're the only one who ever understood me, who ever thought I was good for anything. Take me with you. I could write lyrics for your songs, like I used to do. They were silly then, but I'd be better now. I'm older now; I'm old enough to go wherever you go. You're not living on the street somewhere, I know you're not! "Oh please, please . . ."

Of course he wouldn't come back. That was just silly. Kary saw a log laid across the creek a little way downstream and used it to cross over, hurrying up the dirt path she found on the other side in order to get away from the polluted smell of the water.

There's no way out, is there, Kare, she told herself. *You've always been the vice-principal's daughter; now you'll just be the sister of a juvenile delinquent. Not that he is, of course, but they all think it, and they think it's wonderful that a vice principal has a delinquent for a son. Oh, and I'm also the shy, nerdy sister of Miss Popularity. Sigh. If only I could go to a school where no one had ever heard of the Hills. Then I could start off on the right foot, at least.*

The path was leading her gradually upward, weaving its way between the dappled branches. An idea began to occur to her, forming itself at the back of her brain, and as she emerged from the ravine into an empty field a block from her house she felt that it might very well be a good idea. Jogging home, because her mother was sure to wonder what had taken her so long, she considered the idea from all sides and determined to implement it at once.

By suppertime she thought she knew what she had to do. Halfway through dinner, she launched Plan A.

"Mom, Aunt Nancy lives fairly near to Gordon Heights Junior High School, doesn't she?" Kary's eyes remained innocently on the meatloaf as she spoke.

"Why, yes, she does. We haven't seen them in a while, have we? I'll have to invite them over one of these days. It's funny how you can live in the same city as your own sister and hardly ever see her."

"What are Craig and Robert doing now, Mom?" asked Megan. She had always liked playing with her cousins, who were a few years older than her, but since Brian was gone they had had no good reason to come visit.

"They must be in university by now, wouldn't you think, dear? I seem to remember Nancy saying something about Biology, or something like that. I'm not really sure."

Kary ate her potatoes and bided her time. The discussion meandered around Aunt Nancy for a while longer, but soon flagged. Since Craig and Robert were Brian's age, they were a dangerous topic. When an appropriate pause came, Kary cut her last potato in half and asked casually,

"Isn't Gordon Heights the school with the new French program?"

"That's right. Mrs. Paterson has been raving about it ever since it was started last year. Her son's in it, you know. We were even thinking of putting you in it, Kary, but since we don't live in the neighborhood we'd have to pay extra for you. Why are you so interested?"

This was going perfectly. "Well, I had an idea: if I went to live with Aunt Nancy, couldn't I go to the school without paying extra?"

She could see by the shock and hurt on both parents' faces that Plan A had backfired.

"Kary! Whatever would make you want to live with Aunt Nancy? She doesn't cook half so well as I do." Kary's mother always defended her cooking when she was upset.

"Kary! Don't go saying things like that to your mother! You know how sensitive she is." Kary's father hated it when her mother got upset.

Kary tried to extricate herself. "I didn't mean . . . You've got me all wrong!"

"You distinctly said you wanted to live with Aunt Nancy."

"No, Mom, I said I wanted to enter the French program. It was just an idea. I wouldn't even have to live there, just use her address on all the forms." It didn't matter what she said now; the damage had been done.

"Since when have you been so interested in the French program? You didn't say anything about it when I first mentioned it."

"They talked about it in French class today," Kary lied. "It sounded interesting. It doesn't matter anyway. I just thought it was a good idea."

"I can't believe you would want to leave home, Kary. You're my youngest. You're still a little girl."

"Oh, Mom, I don't want to leave home! I just want to change schools."

"Why, whatever is wrong with Harvey Johnson?"

"Yeah," put in Megan. "I thought it was a great place."

"I don't know," said Kary miserably. "I just don't like it." Everyone was against her; she had nowhere to escape to. "Excuse me. I have to go to the bathroom." She got up to go.

"Not so fast, young lady," her father said. "Your mother asked you a question, and I want to hear an answer. What is wrong with Harvey Johnson?"

How could she possibly tell them? Tears were welling up in her eyes. "All my friends are at Gordon Heights, that's all." That at least was partially true. She certainly didn't have any friends at Harvey Johnson.

Her mother shifted quickly into maternal mode. "You'll make new ones, dear, don't worry. I remember my first day of high school--I didn't know a single soul! But . . ."

"Oh, let the child go to the bathroom," her father said abruptly, and Kary fled the room, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Later that evening, Kary was fiercely brushing her teeth, scrubbing away at everything hateful in her life, when Megan stopped by the bathroom door.

"You were sure brilliant tonight, weren't you. Whatever made you come up with a crazy idea like that?"

"Ah denght moe he ud ake id rid ath."

"What?"

Kary spat out the toothpaste. "I didn't know she would take it like that." She rinsed out her mouth and started washing her face, hiding from Megan's accusations behind the warm facecloth.

"You should know the thought of another kid leaving home would really freak her out. You know how unstable she is now."

"But I wasn't even thinking of leaving home."

"Why'd you say it then? You even got her started on her cooking again. Remember after Brian left, all those gourmet meals she cooked?"

Kary turned to look at her sister, hearing the pain in her voice and sharing the remembrance. For a moment they regained the solidarity they had felt after Brian left and the home fell apart. "That was awful. Every night it was the same: 'He really shouldn't have left home. He's probably eating macaroni and cheese right now, wishing he were back here eating a good, home-cooked meal.'"

"So why'd you have to bring up the whole thing again, especially on a meatloaf night? That was really tactless."

Kary almost laughed. Megan had such a way of putting things sometimes. "I don't know. I wasn't thinking, I guess. I was just so desperate to change schools, and it was the only thing I could think of. I just forgot how she'd look at it." It really was stupid, now that she thought of it.

"I don't get it. Why so desperate?"

"Jody went to Gordon Heights. She was my best friend."

"Sure, but she's probably the only person you know there. Everyone else from Babcock went to Harvey Johnson."

"That's the point." How would Megan understand? Kary rinsed out the sink and turned out the light, preparing to go to her room. Megan stopped her.

"Does this have anything to do with Brian?" she asked in a low voice.

Kary sighed. "Partly."

"Come on, tell me what's wrong."

Megan could be annoyingly persistent. "All right, I'll try." She led her sister into her room. They sat down on the bed. "Do you remember what it was like to be going to the same elementary school that Dad was at?"

"Yeah. 'Be careful what you say, she's Mr. Hill's daughter.' It was especially bad because no one liked him."

"I know. But the point is, they treated us differently because of who we're related to, as if that has anything to do with who we are. And now it's the same thing except with Brian. Not everyone knows, of course, but everyone knows there's something different about our family, something not normal, something to gossip about. And it's as if I wasn't a real person at all, just a character in somebody's juicy story. I can't be talked *to,* just *about* ."

"Is it that bad, really?"

"Well, it wouldn't be, except that all the teachers recognize me, either because of Brian or you. So they expect something from me, I don't know what, and they point out the fact that they know of me, so to top everything off I'm a teacher's pet."

Megan shook her head at her younger sister. "You know what your problem is? You're too shy. Of course everyone's going to be thinking odd things about you if you never say anything. I'll bet you didn't say a single word to anyone all day, did you?"

"Well, I don't know anyone."

"That's no excuse. Listen. You're in junior high school now. You've got to start getting involved in things, making new friends, doing things with people. Of course it's hard when no one knows anything about you except who your brother is. But once they get to know you they'll like you fine. Trust me. It was like that for me, too."

"But it's easy for you. You're outgoing; you know what to say to people."

Their mother's voice interrupted. "Megan? Aren't you in bed yet? You have to get up early tomorrow, remember."

"I'll be there in a second," she called. "You just have to try, Kary, that's all. Will you try?"

"Sure, I'll try," Kary said, not knowing quite what she was promising to try to do.

Megan smiled and ruffled Kary's hair before turning to go. "G'night." She looked very young in her white flannel nightie with her brown braid hanging down her back, not at all like the trendy, sophisticated youth she was during the day. Kary stared after her, trying to understand the sudden outpouring of sisterliness from her normally careless and sarcastic sibling. "G'night," she answered softly. It had been an altogether strange day.

Chapter 3 -- The Path

The next morning it was autumn. Kary awoke to a chill in the room, and when she went to close the window she saw the poplars in the back yard all edged and patched with yellow. A shock of surprise went through her. Autumn always caught her off guard; things remained pretty much the same all through spring and summer, and just when it seemed nothing would ever change, everything did.

What would it be like, she wondered as she stood tasting the new crispness in the air, to be growing and reaching with sap coursing between the deepest roots and the highest leaves, and suddenly to start freezing from the edges in? She imagined the sap running slower and thicker, gradually retreating from the leaves and branches, leaving them cold and brittle and lifeless. She shivered and quickly closed the window. Then she remembered the events of the previous day.

Megan had already left for school when she got downstairs for breakfast, so she had only her mother's advice for consolation. This time she heard the whole story of her mother's traumatic first day of high school, told with drama and embellishments as her mother made her toast.

"So you see, it isn't that hard to make new friends. Just be yourself, and people will like you." She stopped and gave Kary a worried look. "As long as you don't keep your nose buried in a book all day, that is."

Kary tried to smile. "Thanks, Mom. Don't worry. I'll be okay."

Her mother suddenly exclaimed, "Oh Kary! I can't believe you're growing up so fast!"

"You're getting old, Mom!" Kary joked, uncomfortable with her mother's sadness.

Her mother laughed. "You're right about that! Now off with you. You don't want to be late."

Kary's first class was Language Arts, a subject she hadn't had the day before and to which she was looking forward with great anticipation. She got to the classroom fairly early; there was one boy sitting in the far row of chairs, and one girl sitting in the front. She decided to sit a row over and a seat down from the girl, who looked Chinese, with short, straight black hair and glasses; the girl was engrossed in a book and didn't turn around when Kary came in.

Why didn't I bring my book, Kary thought. She looked around the room. Posters covered the walls, not cute ones with funny sayings, but beautiful pictures from museums and art shows. Many were about books, some of which Kary recognized. *The Hobbit: I've read that*, she thought with a touch of pride.

Other students were coming in in groups and sitting together, chattering. A guy came in and sat behind the boy in the far row. No one sat beside the Chinese girl or Kary; they seemed to be the only two who didn't know anyone. *That's all right*, Kary thought, not believing herself. *I don't need to sit around gossiping. I'd rather not know anyone.* Then the four girls with the hair came in. By this time there were few seats left, and nowhere were there four together. The group hung by the doorway, scanning the room and whispering together. Kary pretended she didn't notice them. Finally, a girl with dark brown hair that hung loose about her shoulders except for a single braid on one side was nudged forward by the others. She came up to Kary.

"You're Kary, aren't you?"

As if she didn't know. "Yes," Kary replied, a touch belligerently.

The girl was extremely sweet. "We were wondering if you could possibly move up a seat, so we could all sit together."

Humiliation flared up inside Kary, burning her cheeks and choking her throat. *Could you move up so that we could sit together. That pretty much defines my place in the universe, doesn't it.* Without answering the girl, or even looking at her, Kary picked up her notebooks and moved to the seat ahead. A murmuring rustle filled the seats behind her.

"Thank you," the girl said kindly, but Kary didn't respond. She was so caught up in fighting against tears, which would be ridiculous and uncalled for, that she didn't notice when the teacher walked into the room.

Her attention was quickly lifted away from her distress, however. The tall, thin, grey-haired lady introduced herself as Miss Krawchuck in a mellow, unforgettable voice and immediately began teaching.

"This is a Language Arts class," she said, looking around at the students as she spoke. "Language. Arts. The arts of language. What do you suppose the arts of language are?"

Wow. What a philosophical question to start out the class with.

"Sonya Thompson," she read off the roll. "Tell me what a language art could be."

A girl sitting to the left Kary was caught off guard. "Um, well, I don't know. Poetry?"

"Certainly. A poem is a work of art made out of language. Can anyone think of anything else?"

"A play."

"A novel."

"A story."

"A speech." That was the Chinese girl's response, and it seemed to suit Miss Krawchuck's purposes, because she smiled broadly at it.

"All good answers. Now tell, me, what can we do with language?"

"Speak it," replied the Chinese girl, following the cue.

"Yes. What is your name?"

"Louise."

"Thank you, Louise. What else."

"Read it, write it," came the response from various parts of the room.

"Absolutely. And is there an art to writing?"

The class didn't see what she was getting at.

"I mean, is writing a difficult skill that can be done well or poorly?"

"Yes," came the obvious answer.

"What about reading? Have you ever considered that there may be an art to reading?"

They hadn't. Kary hadn't either, for that matter. This teacher certainly had some interesting ideas.

"Since this is a class in language arts, we will be learning the art of reading, the art of writing, and even a little bit of the art of speaking." There were a few groans at that, but Miss Krawchuck just smiled. "Don't think it will be easy, but, on the other hand, don't think you'll be bored. You never know what's going to happen in your L.A. class!" And with that she pulled a large picture out from behind the desk and propped it up against the blackboard. "You have fifteen minutes in which to write a paragraph describing this scene. Begin now." And she sat down, oblivious to the cries of disbelief and horror that swept through the class at the thought of having to work.

Kary just stared at the picture, laughing silently with admiration. Miss Krawchuck was the most energetic, original teacher she had yet encountered; the prospect for the year which was appalling most of the students was delighting her. She had never been afraid of reading, or writing. Even as she thought these things, her mind was taking in the painting, which showed a bleak desert scene, a dried up river in the foreground, stony, lifeless mountain peaks in the distance. Remembering her daydream of yesterday's math class, she wondered half seriously if she should pretend the scene was on another planet. But no, it would work just as well on earth. She began writing, and everything passed from her mind except the picture and the words that were recreating it on her page.

After Miss Krawchuck had collected the paragraphs, the teacher passed out a reading list.

"These are suggestions for books to do your book reports on. You will have to do one per month for the whole year."

Read a book a month, for homework? Kary could tell she was going to like this course. Many of the books on the list were old favorites; others she had never heard of sounded interesting. The Borrowers. *I wonder what that's about. Well, I'll pass L.A., at least,* Kary thought happily.

"Your assignment for next class," Miss Krawchuck was saying, to more groans, "is to write me another paragraph, this time describing a scene with which you are very familiar. It may be the view from out your bedroom window, it may be your kitchen, it may be your favorite hang-out place. I want you to look at this familiar scene with new eyes and describe it to me in such vivid detail that I can see, hear, feel, and smell it. Don't write more than a page--two pages if your handwriting is large. Understand?"

The bell rang, cutting off the queries about how large large writing was. Kary rose from her seat with a half-smile on her face, thinking already about what to describe for Miss Krawchuck.

"What are you smiling about?" asked the girl beside her, swinging a leather book bag over her shoulder. "This class is going to be brutal!"

Kary was startled. *Why is it so wrong to like L.A.?* she wondered sadly, as she tried to come up with an appropriate reply. "She's going to make us work, that's for sure," she finally said.

"You're probably good at L.A., aren't you," said the girl whose name Kary remembered was Sonya. "Isn't your father a teacher or something?"

What does that have to do with it? Kary was conscious of the girl's dangling earrings, which matched her belt perfectly. "No, he's a vice-principal. And I don't know if I'm good at L.A. I just like reading. I'm terrible at math," she added, as if that might make up for her enjoyment of English.

"I'm terrible at everything," Sonya said with a laugh, tossing her head so her hair brushed her shoulders. "Well, see you around. Hey, Angela! Wait up!" And she skipped out of the room after the chattering foursome who couldn't stand to be separated.

Kary remained standing by her desk, feeling awkward and naïve. *I suppose if I didn't read so much, I'd have more time to spend on my hair,* she thought, trying to be sarcastic. *And if my father wasn't a vice-principal, I'd have enough money to buy clothes like that. Why is it that airheads always look so good?* She heaved a sigh and picked up her books.

Out in the hallway she saw Louise--was that her name?--standing at a locker, staring inside it.

"Hurry up," Kary called to her. "You'll be late for Social." The girl looked around, startled, but Kary didn't want to be late, so she just waved and continued down the hallway. *I wonder what her problem is*, she thought briefly, but then she arrived at the Social Studies classroom and had to decide where to sit.

Social Studies, Science, French, Gym: it was all the same. There was some secret chemistry to the classroom that Kary seemed to miss. She always ended up on the periphery, where no one seemed to notice she existed. Even in Gym she was assigned a locker at the far end of a row, away from everyone else, as if the computer that randomly spewed out names and locker numbers was tied into the cosmic pattern that was governing Kary's life. *It is your dessstiny, Luke,* she told herself morosely as she hung her clothes on the hooks and listened to the scraps of conversation that floated down the row towards her.

Emerging from school at the end of the day, Kary walked slowly across the field, noticing all the other kids heading home in little groups of two or three. She felt very small and alone. *So I'm just supposed to "be myself," and people will like me. Nobody even notices me: how can they like me?* The houses on either side of the street stared disdainfully at her as she walked past them, and she felt like a trespasser. *I don't belong in* *this neighborhood -- maybe that's my problem. I don't fit in because I'm not rich enough.* If she thought that then she could toss her head and say she didn't care about any of them, the rich snobs. *Yes, that must be it. They're snobs and they don't like me because I don't have enough money.*

Consoling herself with these thoughts, she left the houses behind and came to the edge of the ravine. With no roofs to block her view of it, the blue sky seemed suddenly much bigger, much deeper, and she felt herself and her problems dwindle into insignificance before the vastness of the world. It was a pleasant feeling, this insignificance, not at all like the feeling she got at school. She took a deep breath of the crisp blue air and felt a tiny germ of happiness sprout inside.

Just a little way over from where she had entered the ravine the day before Kary noticed a path leading gradually down the slope, making the descent a little easier. She hesitated only a moment before following it down, away from the uppity houses into a world entirely different and removed from the complexities of people, a world of small rustlings and dancing shadows, of gentle smells and hidden breezes. When the path came to the bottom and forked into three new paths Kary realized that there was a whole country down here waiting to be explored. School easily became a dim memory of a bad dream: only this was real. *"Three paths diverged in a wood, and I, . . ." Who wants to go over to someone's house after school to listen to records? This is much more fun.* Each path curved enticingly through the trees, and Kary wanted to follow them all. *I can take a different one each day*, she thought happily, and, swinging her bag over her shoulder like an intrepid explorer, she set off down the middle path.

"Kary! You're almost an hour late. What happened?" Her mother met her at the door, full of worry and anger.

"Nothing happened, Mom. I just took a long way home and walked slowly. It was such a beautiful day."

The creases in her mother's brow deepened. "You didn't go through the ravine, did you?"

Oh oh. What do I say? "There's a path right across it--everyone uses it. It's perfectly safe, Mom."

"You have been expressly forbidden to walk through the ravine!"

"But why? I'm twelve years old. I'm not going to get lost."

"There are worse fates than getting lost. Don't you read the newspapers?"

"It's broad daylight. There's no rapists out. And like I said, lots of people go through the ravine, so it's not exactly lonely and secluded."

"All the same, it's a risk I don't want you to take. How do you think I would feel, getting a call from the hospital: 'Mrs. Hill, your daughter is in critical condition after being raped and beaten and left to die. Or worse, what if no one found you, and you lay there in the ravine bleeding to death? . . . "

Geesh, she must have been really worried. I was only an hour late, not even. It's hardly fair to get this worked up about it.

"Kary, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Mom."

"I want you to promise me that you'll never walk through the ravine again."

Kary looked down at her shoes, which she still hadn't taken off. "I can't do that, Mom."

Her mother stopped mid breath and stared at her. "What did you say?"

"I can't promise never to walk through the ravine, because I know I will. And I don't want to break a promise."

She bent down to take off her shoes while her mother exploded. "Now you're just being cheeky. I won't take that from you, Kary. Especially not from you! Go to your room this instant, and stay there until you reconsider how you want to speak to your mother."

Kary picked up her book bag and walked past her mother up the stairs. Part of her felt hurt and angry and miserable, but strangely enough another part of her remained distant and cold. She felt her anger as if it belonged to a different person. It was an interesting emotion: starting mostly in her stomach, making it tight, and spreading upwards. She noticed that her teeth were clenched. When she dumped her books on the floor of her room and crashed onto the bed, she expected to begin crying immediately, but the cold, aloof part of her wouldn't give in to the tears that were boiling up in her chest.

"So, Nestor, here I am, a rebellious teenager," she addressed her stuffed lion. "I'm actually quite surprised at myself, aren't you? I'm such an obedient child normally." When he didn't reply, she sat up and stared unseeing out her bedroom window. *What's happening to me? Where are all these strange, dark feelings coming from? Who is this girl who's sitting on my bed?* She looked around her room, trying to identify with all the familiar objects in it, but even the furniture she had grown up with seemed remote, alien.

Dad's old office desk, Megan's old night table, Brian's old dresser. And that hideous picture from the basement that Mom thought looked so good on my wall. One day I'm going to throw that picture out, and then what will she do. The irrelevant thoughts flitted through her empty mind like butterflies, finding no place to rest. *Hey. There's a neat image. The condemned prisoner sat in the darkness, restless thoughts flitting through his empty mind like butterflies afraid to land.* She had to laugh at herself. *We're being awfully morbid, now, aren't we. So why do I feel like a comdemned prisoner? What am I condemned for? What am I a prisoner of?*

Her mind went round and round in useless circles until she felt as though she were caught in a whirlpool, and nothing made sense to her any more. Still she couldn't cry. It was as if she were skating around on thick black ice on the surface of her mind, and nothing of what she was really feeling could break through to her.

"Kary! Please come down for supper."

I'm surprised I even get supper, I'm such a cheeky brat, she thought flippantly, but the thought touched the hurt and confusion lying just under the surface, and her strange, dark calm was suddenly shattered. It was hard to keep from crying all through supper.

The wind was balmy. I'm sorry, there's just no other way to describe it. Balmy is one of those unfortunate words like "nerd" and "Melvin" that sound like someone sat on them. No one can take them seriously. But balmy comes from the word "balm," which means something that soothes or heals, and that's what the wind was like tonight. It was quite strong, but not cold, and as I stood in the back yard after supper it washed over me like the ocean, emptying all the tension out of me and leaving my mind blank and open.

-- Hmm. Too bad it wasn't a garden. Garden would have sounded much better in that sentence, but there wasn't one, so back yard will have to do.--

The sound it made ("it" being the wind again) was constant and meaningless, like the static you would hear if you were listening for a message across thousands of light-years of space, only there wasn't one.

The two aliens stood in the field next to the crumpled heap of their ship, listening to the emptiness of the wind. There was nothing to be done. Their only lifeline across the vast blackness to home was destroyed, and no hope remained of escape from the beautiful but desolate planet they had landed on.

Kary stopped writing. *Hey!* she thought. *That's pretty good!* She doubted she could use it as her detailed description of a familiar scene, but the image of the stranded spacemen lodged in her mind and began expanding. She could see the meadow, full of flowers, with a still smoking streak of burnt earth through the middle of it, like the scene in "Superman." It could be the field behind the new subdivision, she thought, and she could see herself walking home from school one day, taking the long route by the ravine, coming upon the two stranded spacepeople . . .

This daydream did not last long, however, because there is only so much one can say to a space alien before one must invite him home to dinner, and at that point reality steps in with all its dull requirements. With a sigh Kary left the aliens discussing mechanics with her father and returned to the wind in the back yard, which she was supposed to be describing.

The wonderful thing about writing was that whatever she tried to describe became part of her inner world while she was describing it, and however banal and everyday it started out, it would be transformed into something almost magical. For the duration of that writing assignment Kary's backyard became super-real to her, and she felt the exhilaration of pen and ink and paper merging into wind and sky and tree and grass and the sleepy bird she had seen looking back at her out of its tiny round eye. She agonized over words, crossed them out, wrote them in again, wrote snide comments to herself in brackets, and was finally satisfied enough to recopy the good parts onto a clean, fresh sheet of looseleaf. And suddenly she was dissatisfied and disgruntled, for her magic world receded and she was left with a two page writing assignment that didn't say any of the things she had felt.

"Well, there it is, Nestor. For what it's worth it's finished." She put it into her binder and flopped onto the bed, taking the lion with her. She felt cleansed and refreshed now: after surviving a horrible dinner time she had returned to her room to cry her heart out; then she had gone into the back yard and abandoned herself to the wind and the twilight; at last she had focussed all her remaining energy on seeing and feeling and describing for the writing assignment. Everything had been taken out of her; she was wrung dry, and it felt good.

"I'm glad I have homework already, otherwise I'd have to listen to more lectures about my own good. 'It's for your own good.' That's what they say," she explained to the animals on her pillow. "How do they know what's for my own good? I don't even know, and I'm me. All I know is that it doesn't feel bad to go through the ravine, and I *want* to."

She swung her legs around and piled all her stuffed animals in her lap. It occured to her that she was a little bit old to be talking to teddy bears, but she didn't care. She had always referred important decisions to her inanimate friends, and they had never let her down. "So look. You've got to help me out here. How am I going to manage to explore the ravine without Mom finding out?" She looked from one creature to another. "Norbert? Bear? Any suggestions? At least I managed not to promise anything, Dad figured I should obey just because they told me to. Somehow I don't feel quite so bad being disobedient as I would if I broke a promise. But I can't get caught, or I'll be grounded forever! Not that that will make a difference, because I never have anywhere to go, anyway, but still."

Her animals had no suggestions for her, and suddenly she was very tired. It seemed to her that yesterday she had still been a child, and now she was something different. Staring at herself in the mirror while brushing her teeth, she wondered what she was; for a long time she stood in the bathroom looking at her reflection, but the eyes that stared back at her were strange to her and did not smile. As she lay in bed, she thought she heard the rustlings of the trees in the back yard, and they led her into dreams of windy skies and falling leaves.

Chapter 4 -- The Clearing

"Detail, detail, detail!" Miss Krawchuck paced back and forth in front of the class, punctuating her words with expressive gestures. "What color is it? How big is it? Is it rough, smooth, bumpy? Is it soft or hard? is it round or oval or squarish? What does it sound like? These are the kinds of things you have to tell me, or I won't really know what you're talking about." She picked up a sheet of paper from her desk. "Now, listen to this paragraph. This is what I call a detailed description." She began reading.

"The fierce desert sun beats down upon the crumbling sand. A hot wind whispers across the tops of dunes that roll in frozen waves to the feet of silent, lifeless mountains in the hazy distance."

Kary sat up in surprise. *That's my paragraph!* Louise looked over with a question in her eye, but since Sonya was also looking her way Kary put an innocent expression on her face and continued looking at Miss Krawchuck as if she had never heard this before. *It's not bad, if I do say so myself.*

Miss Krawchuck finished reading and looked up at the students. "Can anyone tell me what this paragraph has that makes it so good?"

The answer "adjectives" was eventually dragged out of the class, and they were told to look over their homework assignment and add adjectives wherever they could. Kary pulled hers out dutifully and pretended to read it, but she knew she had as many adjectives as she needed, and no more, so she stared at the page in front of her and let her mind wander.

Nestor the lion journeys across the desert, struggling against the heat of the day and the cold of the night, finally reaching the forested mountains on the other side when he is almost dead with thirst and exhaustion. I've read a story like that before--where? Oh, of course, C. S. Lewis, The Horse and His Boy. *I think that one's my favorite of all the Narnia books. That one and* Voyage of the Dawn Treader. *I wish I could go to Narnia.*

"Now, if you're finished, you may hand in your assignments. Remember that you should pick a book for your first book report by the end of next week. It's due at the end of the month."

Maybe one of the Narnia books is on our list. I could do a pretty good report on any one of them.

"Have you decided what book you're going to do your report on?" asked Louise shyly as they were leaving the classroom.

"No, I hadn't even thought about it. What about you?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's so many to choose from." She looked down at her feet, as if she had said something foolish. Kary wasn't sure what to say, so she made something up.

"Do you know if we have to stick to books on the list, or can we choose our own?"

"She didn't say. Maybe we should ask."

"Yeah, maybe." There was a pause. "What are you doing for lunch?" Kary asked, taking a chance.

Louise looked back down at her shoes. "I usually go to the library and read."

"Oh." They had reached Louise's locker, and she stopped to open it. Kary didn't know what the other girl wanted her to say; it almost seemed like she would be just as happy to get rid of Kary. "Well, I guess I'll see you in Math."

"Oh. Okay, see you." Now she seemed disappointed, but Kary didn't know what else to say, since she'd already said goodbye. She trailed off into the next hallway where her locker was, and ate lunch alone.

The last period of the day was a study period, but since there wasn't anything to study yet it wasn't compulsory this week. Everyone exploded into the halls at that announcement and just as quickly vanished from the school, off to hang out at the corner store, or the shopping mall, or the back of the portables, depending on which crowd they were in.

Kary was out of the school as quickly as anyone, which was unusual for her. Usually she lingered irresolutely by her locker, not having anyplace to go but home, and not being terribly anxious to get home and unload the dishwasher, or whatever she would be asked to do. Today was different, however, because she had an hour of free time during which her mother thought she was in school, and she didn't want to waste a minute of it.

It's a day for magical things to happen, Kary thought, as she jogged across the school yard, past the prosaic houses to the ravine. It was making up for a few days of frost with warm, friendly sunshine and a summery breeze. The air was bright, the sky was deep, and as she got to the beginning of the path she had discovered she felt she was beginning a whole new adventure, the kind that only happens in books.

Kary followed her path down, down, away from the world of school and shopping centers and dishwashers into a magical realm of silence and shade. The sun spilled through the trees at just the right angle to create a shimmer in the near distant air, so that Kary found it easy to imagine herself in an enchanted forest. As she continued along the path, following the left hand fork this time, each rustling clump of trees or roundish bush became a potential witches' haven or elves' bower, and the real squirrels and birds she saw flicking out of sight as she passed were Talking Beasts that would bring her messages or warnings.

A squirrel ran out in front of her suddenly, and went chattering up a tree on the other side of the path. *Now, what are you trying to tell me?* she asked it, approaching the tree curiously. It merely whisked up a few more branches and scolded her roundly. *Well, I've always wondered what a round scolding was, and I guess that must be one*, she laughed at it.

But the squirrel had led her to something. Between its tree and the next there was a gap that wasn't filled up with wild rose bushes and other thorny barriers. Low undergrowth grew all over it, so it wasn't noticeable from the main path, but there was definitely a way through the trees here.

Grinning with excitement, imagining anything at the other end from a ruined castle to a smuggler's cottage, Kary stepped onto the green path. To follow it she had to duck under branches and step over logs, but it remained a distinct path, leading up a gradual slope away from the creek.

Kary's imaginary journey took hours and hours, but it wasn't that much later when the path made a sudden steep climb and ended at the edge of a small, beautiful, perfect, sun-drenched meadow. Kary ran out into the middle of it and spun around, delighted. The ravine was quite wide at this point, and her meadow was a little shelf about halfway up, surrounded by trees on three sides and overlooking the creek on the fourth. Bees hummed about its fading flowers, the grass grew waist-high all over, and nothing of the real world could be seen from it, only tree- and grass-covered slopes stretching up to meet the sky.

Kary felt as though she had come home. As she surveyed her new territory, drinking deeply of the golden air that smelt of earth and sap and coolness, a white butterfly fluttered by and hovered above a bright yellow flower. She bent down slowly to look at it. It landed lightly on a leaf and bobbed up and down in the breeze, fanning its wings gently. Entranced by this tiny inhabitant of her kingdom, Kary crouched down beside the flower and watched it for a while, observing at the same time all the miniscule world around her. Grasses rustled and swayed above her head; a fluffy seed parachuted past and got stuck between two leaves of a climbing vine; one dried up flower stalk was leaning against another in a quiet embrace. There was so much to see just in this one small area--Kary stood up suddenly, frightening away the butterfly. *What a wonderful place! It's so full*. She tried to find words to describe how she was feeling. *It makes me full. I am replete with sunshine and life. I . . .* suddenly she noticed how low the sun was getting. *I'm going to be late!* She spread her arms wide, filled her lungs with the warm, rustling air, then turned quickly to scramble back down the path.

There's a story in that meadow, Kary knew. For the first time in a long time she didn't feel like reading a book, because the magical world she had discovered in the ravine was more enticing. As she sat in her room trying to do her math homework, she couldn't keep her thoughts from brooding on the meadow's mystery.

What is it? Is it a witch's cottage? No. Not a witchy kind of meadow. It's too small for a palace of any kind, even a ruined one. Smugglers? Nah, not magic enough. How about a poor scullery maid, running away from her cruel masters, finding an abandoned cottage in the woods and hiding out there. Okay, but then what? I suppose the prince comes riding by one day, falls in love with her great beauty, and they go riding off together into the sunset. Boring, really.

She turned back to her math book and tried to concentrate on the first question. *Of course, long division is even more boring.* She cast her mind back to the image of the meadow, the trees rising all around, the sun mottling the ground beneath the grasses. Who lived in cottages in the woods? Of course! Woodcutters. Woodcutters with sons who wanted to leave the meadow and seek their fortunes in the world. That was it: the story wasn't in the meadow, it just started there. It was the journey through the forest that mattered--that's where the witches and ogres and dragons always were. Kary pushed her math book aside and opened the new notebook she had just labelled, 'Mathematics.' Its clean white pages tempted her, and without thinking she began to write.

In a clearing in the middle of an enchanted forest lived a woodcutter and his son. The woodcutter was extremely poor, and one day he called his son to him and told him he must go out into the world to seek his fortune. So the young boy packed his few belongings, said goodbye to his father, and set off into the forest.

Kary stopped writing and scowled. She could hear Miss Krawchuck's voice in the back of her head and it was not at all pleased. "What does the clearing look like?" the voice asked. "Is it big, is it small, is it green, is it brown, is it covered in snow? What does the woodcutter look like? What does his voice sound like? What about his son? What color is his hair?" The questions went on, and Kary ripped the piece of paper out of her notebook and crumpled it up.

"All right then," she said aloud. "How about this?"

Morning sun streamed into the small, green clearing in the forest, banishing the shadows back underneath the dark trees where they belonged. A tiny wooden cottage had its shutters open to receive the sun, and a cheery line of smoke curled from its chimney. The clearing rang with a steady, hollow chopping sound that came from behind the cottage. All at once a deep, loud voice called from inside the cottage, and the chopping stopped. Soon a small figure dressed in brown ran around to the front of the cottage and went inside.

She stopped again and read over the passage. It still wasn't right. Now it sounded like she was describing a scene from a movie. At this point the camera would zoom in on the cottage and the scene would change to the inside. But Kary didn't have a movie camera, and she didn't know how else she could get inside the cottage and meet the two people there. *That's the problem*, she realized. *I don't want to have to meet my characters, as if I was some stranger walking down the road. I don't want to be in the story at all. Maybe I should start with the boy.*

She ripped out the second sheet of paper and tried again. *Oh, oh. What's his name? Never mind. I'll think of one later.*

_____ lifted the axe above his head and brought it crashing down again into the log he was chopping. The sound echoed among the forested hills above the meadow. Lift, *thwack. Lift, thwack. The rhythmic motion felt good, the warm sunlight streaming over the trees felt good, the clean-smelling air, fresh with dew and morning wood-smoke felt good going into his lungs. Nothing could be better than to get up at the crack of dawn and chop wood while the birds woke up and the bacon sizzled.*

"_____! Breakfast!" called his father from inside the cottage.

_____ let the axe fall into the chopping block and wedge there. He stretched his shoulders and surveyed his morning's work with satisfaction--a whole pile of chopped wood stacked against the cottage. Then he washed his hands and face in the barrel of rainwater by the door and went inside.

-- Much better.--

The tall, grizzled man at the stove turned to greet _____ with a wide smile. "You've been at it for more than an hour already! My old bones can't keep up with you any more!"

The boy laughed. "We've got almost a whole load out there now. We should be able to head down to the village with it this afternoon."

The man brought two plates of bacon and biscuits to the table and paused for a moment, still smiling at the tall, sun-browned youth who stood before him. "You're a great help to me, my boy. I don't know what I'm going to do without you."

"You won't ever have to do without me," _____ replied, surprised. "I'm not ever going to leave you."

"Hmm," his father said, sitting down and pushing a plate towards the boy. "Eat up, boy. We've got some talking to do."

_____ was puzzled, but nothing could keep him from the food in front of him. The mouthwatering aroma made him realize how hungry he was.

After they had both eaten in silence for a while, _____'s father took a drink of milk and leaned back in his chair. "_____," he said. "Do you know what day it is today?"

_____ had to think for a moment. "Wednesday, isn't it?"

His father laughed and shook his head. "No, I mean what day of the year is it?"

The only yearly dates _____ could think of were Christmas and Easter, and it was neither of those, he was sure. Then he remembered the one other day they always celebrated. "Is it my birthday?"

"That it is. And do you know how old you are?"

_____ had no idea. It wasn't something he ever needed to know in his secluded life in the forest. The only people he ever saw besides his father were the villagers to whom they sold their wood, and they had known him ever since he was a baby, so they didn't need to know how old he was. "How old *am* *I, father?" he asked.*

"Well, this is the 17th birthday you've celebrated with me."

"So I'm seventeen years old?"

"Well, that's what we have to talk about. You see, I'm not actually sure *when* *your birthday is. You were about six months old when you came to live with me, and I've always counted that day as your birthday."*

"When I came to live with you? I don't understand. Wasn't I born here?"

The man he had always called father looked him in the eye and said, "No, you weren't born here. I always said I'd tell you the truth when you were old enough. The truth is, I'm not your real father."

Kary was surprised. She hadn't known this was going to happen; it certainly made her story more interesting. But who was his father, then? Did the woodcutter know? No, that would make it too easy. *He'll have to go on a quest to find out who he really is. I wonder if I have to figure that out now, or if I can just find out when he does. But, of course, he'll have to be a prince. There's really no question about it. He got shipwrecked, or stolen away by pirates or fairies, or something like that. But then how's he going to find all this out? Where should he go first? Not to the village. They won't know* *anything. Then he'll have to go through the forest, which is what he was going to do originally. But if that's the case . . .*

"Kary!"

She jumped with surprise. "What!"

It was Megan. "Did you take my pink shirt?"

"I never touched your pink shirt!"

"Well then where is it?"

"I don't know. It's not my shirt! Did you check in the wash?"

"You took it, didn't you!"

"I did not take your shirt!"

"Yeah, right. Then what's it doing in the wash?"

"I never said it was in the wash. I just said it could be there. Why don't you ask Mom. Maybe it was lying on the floor and she picked it up."

"I don't leave my clothes on the floor!"

"Hey! Why are you two shouting at each other?" Their mother was coming up the stairs.

"Kary took my pink shirt without asking."

"I did not!!"

"Do you mean this pink shirt," mother asked, holding it out of the basket of clean laundry.

"I knew it!" Megan pounced on her shirt. "Kary wore it, didn't she."

"I found it on the floor of your closet," mother said as she turned to put the towels away.

Kary couldn't resist. "I told you!"

Megan ignored her. "What were you doing snooping through my closet, Mom?"

"I was not 'snooping,' Megan, and I resent the implication. I was checking for dirty clothes. You complain any time I don't wash something of yours."

"But my closet is private."

"A girl should not keep secrets from her mother."

"Mom, I'm fifteen years old. I deserve a bit of privacy!"

Kary retreated silently into her room.

"Well, maybe if you kept your room neater I wouldn't have to go 'snooping' through your closet."

Kary shut her door quietly and returned to her desk. The clearing in the forest seemed very far away now. She retrieved her math book from the floor with a sigh and opened it again to long division.

Chapter 5 -- The Cottage

"Carelessness is the main source of error for almost every math student." Mrs. Richards stalked up and down in front of the class on her high heeled shoes. Her black hair was pulled sharply back from her face, giving her a severe, angular look. "Math is not difficult, but it requires careful attention to detail. You must not rush your math homework."

Oh, for heaven's sake. Quit lecturing us and just tell us we all failed our last assignment.

"Some of you did a lot more poorly than I had expected on this assignment. You're obviously not taking the time to verify your responses and verification is essential."

Mrs. Richards isn't as thin as Miss Krawchuck, but she's a lot more pointy. She shouldn't paint her fingernails such a blood-red color. With that long nose of hers she looks remarkably like a witch.

"Kary Hill, are you listening to me?"

Kary flushed. "Yes."

"Your assignment was particularly disappointing, Kary. You're turning out to be just like your brother." She held up Kary's assignment. "This is a perfect example of careless work."

Kary's stomach clenched and her mouth went dry. The class had turned to watch her with interested eyes as she sat in the back wondering how to respond. *Why does she hate me? I've done well in Math so far. I've even been trying. And everyone failed this assignment, not just me.*

Mrs. Richards didn't seem to want a response; she continued with the lecture and began handing back the assignments, and the class became more interested in their own problems than in Kary's. But Kary was still tingling all over with embarrassment and anger. *Who does she think I am, that she can single me out like that? It's not fair. Everyone had forgotten who I was. What are they all going to think of me now?*

When the class was finally over, she rushed out of the room so she wouldn't have to talk to anyone. The rest of the day she spent resolutely ignoring everyone and everything. No one noticed her anyway. *Which is just as well. I'd rather be ignored than pitied, or talked about. So long as they don't really know I exist I'm safe from them.*

That was the day she discovered that if she took the most direct path through the ravine, and walked faster than normal, she could get home in the same amount of time it took her when she used the bridge. This essentially defeated the purpose of the ravine, because she could take no time to stop and appreciate the feel of the place, so different from everywhere else, and certainly no time to visit her clearing. But it was the only way to get anywhere near it without being caught. So she raced through the ravine every day after school, enjoying it only because it meant she was defying her mother.

When she got home she would mutter something about homework to do and escape into her bedroom to read. Sometimes she even did homework. Math, especially: she couldn't stand to give Mrs. Richards the satisfaction of failing another Hill. *What a witch.*

It was a week and a half before Kary had the time and the inclination to think again about the story she had started. After a week of Math homework and bored, restless reading, she felt flat and lifeless, as if all joy and spontaneity had been squeezed out of her and she was pressed like a dry leaf between the pages of her days. *Oh, how poetic!* Thoughts of the ravine, which before had inspired her, now only made her angry and guilt-ridden; looking out her bedroom window she saw, not golden light, but falling leaves whirled anxiously by the wind. She felt trapped in the house and in herself.

When Saturday came the rest of her family were off in various places: Megan with her friends, Mom most likely shopping, Dad wherever dads go on Saturdays. As Kary sat alone at the breakfast table, wondering what to do with her day, the frustrations of the week suddenly came to a head.

"I can't take it any more!" she cried to the empty house. "I've got to *do* something." It was then that the image of the clearing in the forest and the woodcutter's cottage returned to her, and she felt a relief so intense it was as if she had been suffocating and could breathe again. With a sense of eagerness and almost trepidation she went upstairs, pulled her Mathmatics notebook from her drawer and read over the few pages she had written in it.

Not bad. Not bad at all. The story filled her up with fresh air and sunshine; her room, the house, her dark thoughts disappeared; she could almost feel the breeze that blew through the clearing ruffling her hair. She picked up her favorite pen and prepared to wrestle with the images that crowded into her mind until they tamed themselves into her next scene.

But first to get rid of those annoying blanks. *I've got to give him a name,* she thought, and abandoned herself to the task of discovering the right one. She began doodling in the margins, writing names and crossing them out.

It can't be a royal-sounding name, because the woodcutter named him, but it has to be strong and noble-sounding. Stephen, Stefan--*no, that comes from Sleeping Beauty.* Kevan--*too normal-sounding.* Karl--*yuck.* Deven. *Hmm. Deven lifted the axe above his head. That doesn't look too bad.*

She filled in all the blanks with Deven and read the story's opening over again. It sounded right. *"How old am I, father," Deven asked.* Yes. that was his name. The story flowed right on from where she had left off.

"The truth is, I'm not your real father."

Deven was stunned. How could the woodcutter not be his father? Life turned itself upside-down, and suddenly everything he had believed and expected and planned on was no longer real. "But--" was all he could say.

The man who was not his father smiled sympathetically. "Let me tell you the whole story, and then you'll understand. Seventeen years ago, I made a journey down to the coast to settle some family affairs. There was a great storm the night after I arrived, and the *next morning I went walking along the beach, looking for anything of value that might have washed ashore. Among all the flotsam and jetsam cast up on the beach I came upon a large wine cask that seemed undamaged. Thinking there might still be wine in it, I opened it up. What was my surprise to find a small child lying inside!"*

Deven's eyes grew wide as the woodcutter looked up at him and said, "That baby was you. You were nearly dead of cold and hunger, but I brought you back to the inn where I was staying and the innkeeper's wife revived you and took care of your hurts. In the meantime, I tried to find out where you had come from. You had no clothes on, and no identification at all except for this ring on your finger." He lifted a chain from around his neck and showed Deven what was hanging on it: a small, gold ring, curiously carved all around with twisting, leafy branches. "Here. Take this and keep it safe. It's yours."

Deven dropped the chain over his head and felt the ring, still warm from the woodcutter's skin, rest against his chest.

His foster father continued. "Unfortunately, we discovered nothing about who you might be. I stayed in that inn for a month, searching for news of a missing child, a shipwreck, anything that might give us a clue, but all in vain. At last I had to return, and since there was no one else who could take care of you, I decided to take you with me." He laughed. "The innkeeper's wife was certainly loathe to part with you! But she had children of her own to take care of. So you came with me."

He paused, looking over at the confused young boy who was listening in silence to the strange tale of his origin. "I've had the happiest seventeen years of my life, raising you and watching you turn into a fine young man. But it's your right to learn the truth about yourself, and it's only fair that I give you the chance to find out who you really are, much as I would like you to stay here and be my son."

Deven didn't know what to say.

Neither did Kary. Her simple tale had gotten much more confusing than she had planned. Now she almost wanted Deven to stay with the woodcutter. *But what kind of a story would that make?*

She stretched her arms and looked around the room. All was familiar and right. Piled atop her patchwork quilt, her stuffed animals regarded her with open, generous stares: Bear, Buffy, Nestor, Norbert, Charles, Honey, and Candace, Queen of Bears. Kary smiled back at them.

"It's nice being here by ourselves, isn't it?"

The silence of the house was a blessing to Kary--she was free to write, or talk to herself and her animals, or read, or sit staring off into space, without fear of interruption or censure. She sat listening to the silence for a while, enjoying the feeling of independence it gave her. Then she went back to her story and read it over.

"Now what happens?" she asked Bear, who was watching her quizzically. He continued to stare at her with an expression of innocent wonder. "Never mind. I know."

Deven didn't know what to say. He didn't want to leave the woodcutter, the cheerful little cottage in the clearing, the simple, friendly villagers. But his foster father's tale filled his mind with enticing images of the wide world beyond the forest, and filled his heart with a strange new longing to find out who he was.

"I must think about this for a while," he told the woodcutter, and the man excused him from the table. Deven took his little wooden flute that he had carved himself and spent the day wandering in the edges of the forest, piping to the hills and turning things over in his mind. When evening came he had reached his decision.

"Father," he said at the dinnertable, "for I still think of you as my father, and you have been a father to me: I will go in search of my birthright. I will travel the country up and down, asking everyone I meet if they recognize my ring. I hope at the least I will learn something about my family, even if I never find them. But this I promise you: whatever I

discover, be it good or bad, I will return to you. If I have good fortune, I will share it with you, and if not, I hope I will always have a place to live and work in this cottage beside you."

The old woodcutter was pleased with the decision the boy had made, and gave him his blessing. The next morning Deven set off at dawn with his few belongings, his flute, and some bread and cheese tied up in a handkerchief at the end of a stick. The morning sun broke clear above the trees as he waved goodbye to the only home he had ever known and disappeared into the forest.

The phone rang. Kary jumped at the unexpected sound, then scrambled out to the hall to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is Kary there?"

Who could this be? "Speaking."

"Hi, Kary? This is Lynne, from class."

"Oh! Hi." Lynne was a bouncy, friendly girl in Kary's class who talked to everyone, all the time.

"I was wondering, have you done your French assignment yet? I'm on the first question, and I don't get it at all."

"Gee, I almost forgot about French. Hold on a sec and I'll get it." She hurried back into her room. Now, where on earth did she put her French book? She seldom bothered to do her French homework until just before it was due--it was so easy. Ah--there, underneath the science book. She hurried back to the phone.

"Here it is. What page was it on again?"

"Page 45. The Possessive. It just doesn't make any sense."

"Well," Kary began, flipping through the book until she found the page. "Hmm. How about question one. Did you get that one? 'It is Michelle's book.'"

"C'est le livre de Michelle?"

"That's right."

"But where does the 'a' come in? In the example it's 'Le livre est à Michelle.'"

"Oh. Well, . . ." And Kary tried to explain the various ways of saying that this book belongs to Michelle.

They eventually went through most of the questions on the assignment. At least Lynne truly wanted to understand, unlike others who came up to Kary in school and just wanted the answers. All the same, Kary felt a little awkward in her role as tutor. After all, Lynne was someone to be admired: she was cute, in a roundish sort of way; she seemed to know everyone and be friends with everyone; she was involved in everything, from the Student's Union to the Drama club. And here Kary was telling her how to do her French homework.

"Thanks, Kary, you really helped a lot. I would have failed this one for sure."

"Any time," responded Kary. She had the odd feeling that she was now in control of the conversation. There was an awkward pause. When Kary couldn't think of anything to say, Lynne stepped in.

"Well, I guess I'd better start on my math now. Thanks again."

Kary briefly considered making a joke about her own lack of ability in Math, but decided against it. "You're welcome, really."

"See you at school on Monday?"

"Yeah, see you then."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Kary stood by the phone, staring down at it. *She wanted me to say something. She paused so that I could make conversation, and I just stood there like a dummy. But what was I supposed to say? I don't know who's going out with who, I don't have any new clothes, I don't know what the top bands are this week--is there anything else to talk* *about? I could have asked her about schoolwork, but that would have sounded so keener-ish.*

She sighed and went back to her room. *What I really felt like talking about was my story, but I can just see how well that would go over:*

"Say, Lynne, I've just started writing this new story. It's about a woodcutter and his son, who's not really his son, as he finds out in the first scene, and . . ."

"Oh, how nice for you. Well, gotta go. Catch you later."

Humph. Kary's Secrets of Social Success., scenario one.

Brian had listened when she talked about her stories. She had told him everything, every idea she had, every poem she wrote--at least, well, most of them. "Now I've just got you guys," she told the gang on her pillow. "Not that you're not wonderful, or anything like that. In fact, who could ask for better friends!" She swooped them all into a big hug, and then flopped backwards on the bed, thinking about the story.

Life was so much simpler for Deven. Whatever would happen to him on his journey, it would be exciting, adventurous. All he had to do was find his family--he didn't have to live with them. He would have dangerous challenges to overcome, formidable enemies to face, trials of endurance and strength and knowledge, and everything would come out all right in the end.

"I don't know what he's going to do next, Bear, but I know it won't be boring or stupid or petty." She sat herself down in the midst of her animals. "What do you think, Nestor? What's going to happen next? What? My book report? Oh my gosh, you're right! I completely forgot! It's due Monday, isn't it. I'd better start reading *Emily of New Moon* ." So she closed up her Mathmatics notebook, put it in her bottom drawer under her Grade Three, Four and Five notes, and found the library book (which was due yesterday) under a stack of Social notes. The rest of the afternoon she spent happily reading about another lonely girl who loved trees and wrote poetry.

"Mom, would it be all right if I stayed after school some days to study in the library?"

Her mother turned around from the fridge. "How late were you thinking of staying?"

"Oh, just an hour or so. That way I don't have to take books out of the library and cart them back and forth."

"As long as you get home before dark," her mother replied, setting the milk on the table. "The days are starting to get shorter, you know."

"Oh yes. Don't worry, I won't walk home in the dark."

"All right, then." She went to the cupboard. "Corn Flakes or Rice Krispies?"

"Corn Flakes, please." *Perfect! I can't believe how easy it was. I can't believe I'm doing this. I've never lied to her before.* "I think I'll stay late today, then, unless you had other plans. I've got a lot of work to do. Dinner's still at six?"

"Yes. Lasagna tonight."

"Well, I'll be home for sure in time to make a salad."

"That's good of you, dear. Have you got everything you need for school?"

"Yup, thanks." *I'm so terrible. I never thought I could be so deceitful. And for what? Just so I can have more time to walk through the ravine. I must be some kind of nutcase.*

"Hurry up, dear. It's time to leave."

"I'm going, I'm going. See you tonight."

"Bye."

"Help me, Kary!" cried Sonya that morning in Social Studies. "I didn't get any of the questions we were supposed to do for today!" She absently pushed aside the stylish lock of hair that always fell in her face and regarded Kary with melodramatic eyes. Everything that happened to Sonya was a catastrophe.

Kary had a hard time understanding how someone could fail to understand such a simple assignment. "Did you read the chapter?" she asked, trying without much success to sound sympathetic.

"Oh, yes, I swear I did, but the questions made no sense to me."

"All you had to do was fill in the dates for the different explorers. Here--" She took Sonya's text book and opened it to the appropriate chapter. "See, the question asks when Samuel de Champlain first landed in Quebec, so you just go back to the chapter, and it says, 'Samuel de Champlain landed in Quebec in 16--.' That's the answer."

"Is that all they want?"

"That's all I put."

"Oh! The way the questions are worded it sounds so much more complicated."

"Yes, well, they do try to confuse us as much as they can," Kary responded ironically. Louise, who was sitting on the other side of her, caught the irony and flashed Kary a quick smile. Sonya accepted the sympathy at face value.

"Yeah, I hate these textbooks." She looked around, but there was no one else in the room yet to talk to. "Say, Kary, are you going to the Halloween Dance? It's the first dance of the year."

"I don't know," said Kary, quite determined that she was *not* going to the dance. "I hadn't thought of it."

"Oh, come. It will be so much fun. I can't wait. And you know what else . . . " She leaned closer to Kary as if to tell her a secret, but at that moment the four girls arrived. "Oh! I'll tell you later. Thanks, Kary!" And she fluttered off to join their gossipy group.

*

It was a relief to get out of school that afternoon and look forward to a whole hour of leisurely exploring and enjoying the ravine. Kary paused at the top of the ravine to enjoy the view across the rustling golden poplars to the backyards on the other side, full of plum and mountain ash and willows, each with its own color and shape. Autumn was in full swing, and the vivid colors of the dying leaves against the brilliant blue sky evoked a rush of wonder and delight in Kary's heart. As she walked down among the trees in the ravine, hearing their dry rustlings above her and crunching their leavings beneath her feet, a sense of adventure and anticipation lifted her spirits. The air was cold but it smelt of warm things, of woodfires in log cabins and cozy burrows underground, lined with leaves and pine needles. Kary breathed deeply and felt herself relax inside for the first time in a long while. *I missed this. How can this be wrong?*

She was just approaching the hidden path that led to her clearing when she heard voices ahead of her. Not wanting to be seen by anyone, in case they should know her mother, and not wanting anyone to know of the hidden path, she turned and ran back the way she came, turning down another side path in hopes that the intruders would keep going straight. Waiting behind a large clump of bushes just around a bend in the side path, she saw a dog go by on the main path, followed by two women in brightly colored jogging suits. They were walking briskly and talking breathlessly to each other, and they continued on down the path without so much as a glance in Kary's direction.

With a sigh of relief, Kary came out from behind the bushes and started back towards her clearing. But another sound of crunching footsteps made her freeze and retreat into the trees. She couldn't tell where these footsteps were going, and the slender poplar trunks offered no hiding spots. Heart beating wildly, she found a small spruce tree a ways from the path and crouched behind it. Just in time: immediately the owner of the footsteps came into sight. It was a boy about Kary's age; she recognized him from school but didn't know who he was. He turned down the side path Kary had previously hidden in, and then he paused, listening and peering about.

Oh oh, he heard me crashing through the bushes. He's going to come look for me. But the boy only shrugged and continued down the path, disappearing around the bend.

Kary almost laughed aloud. *It's like playing spies or something. Kary Hill, secret agent. No one suspects this mild-mannered young girl is really working for the British Government, uncovering devious plots and breaking up crooked drug rings.*

She reached her hidden path at last, without further disturbances, and Kary Hill, secret agent, became Kary/Deven, wanderer through the enchanted forest. With half of its leaves gone, the wood looked significantly less enchanted; she could see too far through the trees for there to be anything mysterious hidden there. But her clearing was, if anything, more magical because of the golden tree tops surrounding it, and the rustling brown grasses whispering secret messages to the wind.

"What is it?" she whispered back at them as she wandered through the clearing. "Tell me your secret. I won't tell." But they could not or would not speak to her, and although the longer she listened the closer she got to believing they did have something to say, she eventually had to leave them to their whisperings and go home to make salad.

They must have told her something, though, because when she went to her room after dinner her thoughts were full of Deven and the forest, and when she opened her notebook to start writing the images were there to be put into words.

Deven walked with light, easy strides along the forest path, playing a cheerful tune on his flute. His heart was full of excitement and anticipation. There was a whole world ahead of him, waiting to be explored. Already, after walking only about an hour, he was out of familiar territory, and everything was new.

It was turning out to be a beautiful day. Here within the trees Deven walked in pleasant shade, sprinkled with bits of sunlight and rustled with gentle breezes. The path was narrow and winding, an old path of hard-packed earth, bounded by moss and bracken.

--Hold on. What is bracken, anyway? Where's the dictionary . . . "kind of large fern . . ." Perfect! I knew it was right--

Tree roots and large rocks provided natural stairs when the path curved around a bit and began going downhill. At the bottom of the slope was a stream, from which he drank cold, sweet water and felt refreshed. His journey continued in the same way for the rest of the day, the path gently rolling up and down hills, frequently crossing litttle streams, always carrying him on with an assured air of going someplace. It was a path that knew its business, and Deven trusted it.

As afternoon lengthened into evening, and the shadows under the trees grew cooler, he began to concern himself with a place to sleep for the night. He had passed no human habitation of any kind in his walk, nor any paths branching off that might lead to some such place. He was not overly worried, since he knew he would be fine rolled up in a blanket under a tree, but he thought he would go on a little further and see if he came to anything promising.

As luck would have it, he topped the next ridge just as it got quite dark, and down in the valley below him he saw a light burning. He hastened down the path to see where it came from, and soon discovered a neat little cottage by the side of the path, with a lantern burning cheerfully in the window.

"What luck," Deven thought, and he went up to the little cottage door and knocked.

--All right, there's two possibilities. Either it's a kind old hermit, or old woman, who can give him shelter for the night, or it's a wicked witch or ogre, who will invite him in then try to have him for supper. Which do we want? Then there's a third possibility: it's a kind old woman whose husband (or son) is an ogre. Or whose sister is a witch, I suppose. Yes. I like that idea--

A harsh, frail whisper answered Deven's knock. "Who's there?"

Deven had already planned what he would say to anyone he met. "My name is Deven. I am a woodcutter's son seeking my fortune in the world. I seek shelter for the night."

The door opened a crack, and Deven could see eyes peering at him over a large, pointed nose. "Here you'll find neither shelter nor fortune, my good lad," the voice continued whispering. "You'd best be off before ~~harm befalls~~ you." The nose withdrew and the door shut.

"Wait!" Deven cried. "What do you mean, harm will befall me? Is there some danger here from which you need protection? Let me stay and help you."

The door opened a bit wider this time, and Deven could see silver eyebrows arched above the curious eyes. "You're a brave lad, aren't you," she said, no longer whispering. Her voice was surprisingly gentle. "And a kind one. Well, it's a risk, but perhaps I can feed you a bit of supper before sending you out of harm's way." And she pulled the door open and ushered him into the cottage.

The first thing he noticed was that it was much bigger on the inside than it had looked on the outside. He was in a kitchen, from the looks of it, and there was a huge fireplace at one end, and a long wooden table in the center, covered with vegetables, herbs, and strange-looking plants and mushrooms, plus books and papers, and several vials, bowls, and pots of various sizes, that looked nothing like any pots Deven had ever seen. Hanging from the ceiling were more pots and pans, more vegetables and herbs, a side of bacon, and some nasty looking knives. It was a strange place, and Deven did not feel at all comfortable in it.

The second thing he noticed was that the little old lady was neither so little nor so old as he had thought. Her hair was silver, and her face was a little wrinkled, but she was tall and straight, and her eyes glittered with strength and intelligence. On impulse, Deven swept her a bow. "My thanks, Madam, for your hospitality."

Her face crinkled into a smile. "You're polite, too, I see. Well, come and sit down--no, not at the table. Over here, by the fire--and I'll try to explain my odd circumstances."

Kary's head was drooping over her page, and her eyelids finally defeated her efforts to keep them open. The old woman's explanation would have to wait. Kary stumbled into bed and sailed away into a land far, far more beautiful than any she had yet imagined.

Chapter 6 -- The Witch

"Are you going to the Halloween Dance, Kary?" Megan asked, a few days later. "It's really a lot of fun. Everyone dresses up, and they have costume contests, and homemade root beer with dry ice. You'd have a great time."

"What would I dress up as?" Kary asked, as if that were the insurmountable difficulty preventing her from going.

"That's easy. You can use my old belly dancer costume. It would fit."

"You want me to dress up as a belly dancer?? I'd look ridiculous!"

"No you wouldn't. It's a really great costume. Come into my room. We'll try it on you."

So Kary put up with Megan's ministrations and came out of her room swathed in veils and jewels. She had to admit, it was a nice costume. Megan had worn it for her ballet class's final performance several years ago, so it was more authentic than most Halloween costumes. She looked at herself in the mirror.

"You look great!" exclaimed Megan. "Better than I ever looked in it, 'cause you're skinnier."

Skinny is right, Kary thought. There were no hips to hang the gauzy skirt on, so it was cinched around her waist, and as the scarves of the bodice fell straight from her shoulders across her flat chest, there ended up being very little stomach showing. Which suited her fine. *Sexy I'm certainly not,* she decided, turning to and fro so the veils swirled around her. *But mysterious, maybe. If I can't be alluring I can at least be mysterious .*

"That veil over the face is perfect. We'll just do up your eyes with tons of shadow and mascara, and you'll look just like an Arabian princess."

She was taking it for granted that Kary would go, but Kary wasn't so sure. "I still haven't decided if I'm going or not," she warned her sister.

Megan passed off her objections. "How could you not go? It would be the waste of a perfect costume. You'll be too big for it next year, I bet."

Kary just snorted and went to take off the costume. In her room she paused for a moment, and, imagining the sultry music of a low pipe playing in the background, slowly tried to wiggle her hips and move her arms seductively. But she only felt awkward and bony--all angles, no curves--so she laughed at herself and pulled off the ridiculous scarves.

As if, Kary, she told herself. *As if*.

The Halloween Dance just wouldn't let Kary be. Everywhere she went it was all anyone could talk about. At school all the grade 7's were madly excited because it was the first dance most of them had ever been to. Sonya fluttered around in a panic for two weeks straight, wondering what she'd dress up as, and, more importantly, who would dance with her. Lynne was on the dance committee, so she was busy planning food and decorations, putting up posters, getting tickets printed and selling them--all the organizing things she loved to do. The boys didn't talk about it, except to tease the girls that no one would dance with them, and that bothered no one except Sonya.

The big and exciting mystery of the class was what the girls with the hair would dress up as, because they spent all their time whispering and giggling and looking mysterious, and would tell no one, not even Sonya. Kary didn't care what they dressed as, so long as it wasn't belly dancers. Then she caught herself, since that would only matter if she went. *I absolutely don't care what they dress as*, she amended.

Even at home she couldn't get away from the topic. Megan had told their mother, who thought it was a marvellous idea and set about arranging everything for Kary.

"I've just been talking to Mrs. Dohler down the street," she announced one evening at dinner. "Her son Trevor is going to the dance--she's made him a dragon costume, sewed the whole thing herself! Anyway, I thought the two of you could go together, since she was planning on driving Trevor anyway."

"Mom!" Kary couldn't believe she'd done that. She didn't even know Trevor--he was in another class--and besides, she wasn't going to the dance.

"What's wrong? You didn't think I'd let you walk, did you? Not in the dark; not on Halloween. How else are you going to get there?"

"I'm not going," Kary said emphatically.

Her mother was taken aback. "Why ever not, dear? From what Megan tells me, it's the social event of the fall. You can't possibly miss it."

"But . . . I have too much homework," she said, appealing to her father. He had been listening without comment to the discussion, but now he stepped in.

"She's got a point, Beth. If she feels it would interfere with her school work, there's no question which is more important."

"It's just one evening, and a Friday night at that. She'll have all weekend to do her homework."

"I think she's showing admirable dedication to her studies," said her father, in a voice that usually ended all discussion, "and I don't think you should discourage her. The dance can't be that important."

Megan made a face at Kary. She didn't like the turn the conversation had taken. After all, Megan wanted to go to dances.

"I think perhaps it is," their mother was saying. "Social events are particularly important for girls of her age. There is more to life than just schoolwork."

"That's what parents say whose children grow up to be plumbers and shoe salesmen. I want a little more from my daughters, don't you?"

Megan and Kary exchanged a significant glance, and Megan got up from the table. Neither of them much liked the way the conversation was going now. It sounded a bit too much like the arguments about Brian that went on a year ago. Kary wanted to leave too, but since the argument was about her she wasn't sure she could get up without being noticed.

"You want them to become doctors and lawyers, I suppose." A hard edge was creeping into their mother's voice. She very seldom carried a disagreement this far. "I think we should let them decide their own futures."

"Oh? The way Brian has decided his?"

Kary stood up and started clearing the table. Her parents ignored her.

"I haven't damned Brian the way you have," her mother said fiercely. It was the first time she had openly attacked her husband's attitute towards his son, and she backed off quickly. "But that's not at issue at the moment. The point is, it won't hurt Kary to go to a few social events at school, and I think it could really help her."

Her father obviously didn't want to pursue Brian any further either. "The point is, Kary doesn't want to go to the dance, and if she'd rather do homework I think we should encourage her."

Oh no, don't bring me into this now. I'm not here. I'm not really here.

They turned to look at her. "Kary? What do you really want to do?" her mother asked.

Oh, help . She spoke quickly, her voice a little higher than usual. "Maybe I'll try to do extra homework all week long, so I get ahead in everything, and if I think I have time when Friday comes I'll go to the dance." She hadn't answered the question, but she hoped she'd satisfied both of them. There was no way she was going to side with one or the other, even if her father was mostly right.

Her mother looked a little disappointed. "What should I tell Mrs. Dohler then?"

That was what had started this whole thing, and Kary had forgotten all about it. "Well, don't say anything. If I can't go on Friday, I'll call Trevor and tell him. Can I go start my homework now?"

"Go ahead, dear. Thanks for loading the dishwasher."

Kary left the room, her gut tight with frustration. Her parents started up again behind her, but she shut their voices out and walked quietly upstairs.

"I don't see how you can accuse me of trying to arrange their lives." Her father's voice followed her to her room. "You're the one who's always interfering--calling Mrs. Dohler--for Pete's sake, Beth, why did you do that?"

I don't care if they're fighting about me. I'm not going to think about it. It's not my problem. Just ignore them . She shut the door of her room and sat down at her desk, looking out the window. Most of the trees in the backyard had turned colors, looking bright yellow or red against the glowing evening sky, and king among them all was still the mountain ash, full and colorful with green, yellow, and orange leaves surrounding the bright red berries. Kary stared out the window watching the advancing shadows rob color and life from the world outside her window. The moment of twilight was so beautiful, and so fleeting. Deprived of the light, the mountain ash became grey and lifeless, and Kary suddenly thought with a shudder of the rusty knife she had pulled from it. *Where are you now, Brian?* she thought, wondering morbidly which omen was right, the bright and colorful tree of life or the shadowed tree of death.

This is stupid . She turned away from the window and turned on her desk lamp. Without really deciding what to do, she opened the bottom drawer and pulled out the notebook labled Mathematics. Inside was a world so far from her own that even Brian was forgotten when she journeyed there. Kary opened it.

"My thanks, Madam, for your hospitality."

Her face crinkled into a smile. "You're polite, too, I see. Well, come and sit down--no, not at the table. Over here, by the fire--and I'll try to explain my odd circumstances."

Deven gratefully sank into the bench she motioned him to. He hadn't noticed how tired he was from walking all day until he stopped. He also hadn't realized how hungry he was until he smelled the stew--or whatever it was--bubbling in a pot hung over the fire.

The old woman brought over two wooden bowls and scooped a generous ladleful into each.

"Here. I can see you're hungry, so you can eat while we talk." When he hesitated a moment, she laughed and reassured him, "Don't worry. It's just rabbit stew. There's nothing out of the ordinary in it."

Relieved, because he had wondered about some of the plants on the table, Deven fell to with relish. The woman ate her stew slowly, in small bites, pausing between each to tell her story to Deven.

"The reason you cannot stay here for the night is that I have a sister who lives with me, and she is a witch. The plants and implements you see on the table are hers. She uses them to mix her potions and make her spells."

Deven's eyes were wide, but his mouth was full, so he said nothing, only stared at her in disbelief.

"Well might you wonder why I remain living with a powerful sorceress such as my sister. The truth is, I have a little power myself," Deven swallowed quickly and almost choked. She handed him a glass of water as she continued, "though I have only ever used it to remedy in part the trouble she causes. That is one reason I stay: to watch her and make sure she does nothing too evil or destructive in her quest for power. I cannot always help, but I can try. The other reason is that she needs me, although she would never admit it. And there will come a time when her powers fail utterly, and she will need me even more. So I stay. She, of course, knows nothing of my reasons. She believes I am here because I am trapped and cannot leave. It makes her happy to think that."

Deven had finished his stew and water and could talk. "She sounds horrible!" was all he could say.

The woman smiled and shook her head as she picked up the dishes and went to rinse them and put them away. "She is to be pitied, rather than hated. Her life has been wasted in cramped, evil deeds, in vengeance and in lust. She could have been so much *more. But enough talk of her. She will be home at midnight, so we have a little time left to talk of you and your journey before I must send you on your way." She returned to the fire and sat down. "So. You are a woodcutter's son off to seek your fortune?"*

"Well, not exactly, to tell the truth. I have lived with a woodcutter all my life, and have been raised as his son, but I found out only yesterday that he is not my real father. So I am seeking my true parentage. Which, I suppose, will turn out to be my fortune, for better or for worse."

Kary's hand was cramped, so she stopped to shake it out. It was a good place to stop and think, because she wasn't sure what was going to come next. Would the old woman know who Deven really was, and be able to give him some kind of a clue? Because, of course, she was a witch too, only a good one. Perhaps she knew an old prophecy that she didn't understand but thought might apply to his quest. Or maybe she would just give him advice to help him face certain dangers on the path, or a talisman to protect him from evil.

It would help if Kary knew exactly what was going to happen to Deven on his quest, but she really had no idea. Closing the notebook in frustration, she got up to pace her room. Images and ideas often came to her more easily when she was moving around, keeping her body occupied as her eyes unfocused and her mind turned further and further inward.

It was no use. Her parents had moved their argument upstairs, and although their voices were lowered and muted by the closed door of their room, Kary could still feel the tension. Deven and the forest receded. Her inward-looking eyes saw only confusion and hurt; instead of escaping to far-off scenes her mind was dwelling on painful memories: finding Brian's note on her desk, her father's explosion of anger when he found the note on the kitchen table, her mother's tears; then, Christmas without Brian, the strained attempts at gaiety, Kary's present for him, hidden under the bed in hopes he would come back if only for that day; then, Kary's birthday, when he didn't call. Hot tears streamed down her face as she reopened painful wounds and felt with renewed intensity the emptiness of missing Brian. Sitting tensely on the edge of her bed Kary grabbed Nestor and buried her face in his tangled plush mane.

"Oh, Nestor," she sobbed. "If only he would call. Or write, even, just to let us know he's okay. Why didn't he even send me a birthday card?" Fresh tears flowed, and she suddenly felt she was very near the heart of the pain.

"Brian! Why didn't you tell me you were going?" she cried, and that hit the truth of it. "I wouldn't mind missing you so much, that wouldn't be so bad, if only I had been able to say goodbye. You told me everything, I thought. Why didn't you tell me you were going?" A sense of betrayal flooded her--for the first time since he left she admitted she was angry at him. Angry that he didn't explain himself to her, angry that he left her alone to face the aftermath of his leaving, angry that he didn't try to make some kind of contact, if not for Kary's sake then for their mother.

"You're a stupid, selfish idiot," she muttered. "Didn't you know Mom would break down when you left? Didn't you know Dad would blame her? Didn't you know we'd get the worst end of it? No, not you, Nestor. You haven't done anything wrong." She replaced the slightly soggy lion with his companions and turned to face the group of them. "And what was that note supposed to mean?" Pulling it out of the drawer in her night table, she read it to the stuffed tribunal.

"I'm sorry I have to leave you like this. I'll always be thinking of you. I expect great things from you, Kare -- Don't let me down."

That was it. "Don't let me down?" she questioned the mild-eyed jurors. "How can he say that? He's the one that let me down. He has no right to ask anything of me." The jurors refused to pass judgement. Kary felt suddenly tired and empty. "What's the use, anyway?"

She heard her father stomp downstairs and turn on the T.V. Her mother would start crying now--she never cried when he could see her. Kary ached helplessly. What could she do?

Candace, Queen of Bears, gazed across the room with royal disdain.

"I suppose I could clean my room. She's only asked me a thousand times, and I still haven't done it. That would make her happy, wouldn't it?" Candace, Queen of Bears, didn't know.

She discovered it when she emptied out her bottom drawer to sort and organize the ancient piles of junk that had migrated there through the years. It was lying between Mel Green's Easy Guitar Chords and her folder of artwork--all bad--from Grade 6. It was a map.

Kary sat crosslegged on the floor, surrounded by half-sorted piles of paper, and followed the crudely drawn lines and symbols which represented mountains and rivers, lakes and forests. She had drawn it herself, a long time ago, and had begun a story to go with it, but for some reason the story remained unfinished, and it and the map were filed away and forgotten. Kary turned it over and read the opening of the story, her mind quickening with remembrance.

Once upon a time, in the lovely, far-off land of Caralisle, there lived a king and a queen, King Arman and Queen Quelce.

This is wonderful, thought Kary. It was the story she had started for Brian, and she remembered his disappointment when she had said she couldn't figure out how to finish it. The two half-finished stories, Tatania's and Deven's, fit together like a key into a lock. Looking at the map again she saw, as if it had always been there, the little village, and the clearing in the forest. *Here, on the other side of the mountains from the Palace City* *(needs a better name), in the foothills. So Deven is going to journey across the mountains, somehow find out about the princess, and go to the Swamp of Sinmole and rescue her.*

The scenes were forming themselves in her mind as she went to put the map with her notebook. A few things in the earlier story would have to change to fit the new one. For one thing, jealousy was a pretty stupid reason for a witch to kidnap someone. The old woman's sister--who, of course, was the witch in question--surely had enough other reasons to kidnap Tatania.

And if she's the witch, then Deven must find out about the princess while he's in the cottage. Okay. Then what will happen when he crosses the mountains, and how will he get to the Swamp of Sinmole? (That name I like.)

She was standing in the middle of her room, surrounded by piles of paper and books, staring off into space, when her mother came in.

"Kary! What *are* you doing?"

Kary jumped. "I'm cleaning my room, Mom."

"Well, you could have fooled me." She turned to go. Kary's heart sank.

"But I am, Mom. I'm just trying to organize all my papers; that's why it's such a mess right now."

"That's a novel excuse."

"But . . . "

"Oh, never mind. You just keep 'organizing your papers.' As Megan always says, I should learn to mind my own business." And she left.

But I was trying to be good; I was trying to make you feel better. Kary flopped onto her bed, a few angry tears squeezing out of her eyes. *Why can't I do anything right??*

"Are you going to the dance, Kary?" asked Louise in her soft, hesitant voice as they walked to their lockers from the last class of the day.

"Oh, I haven't decided yet," Kary replied, as if it was of no consequence whatsoever. *How annoying. Even Louise is all up on the stupid dance.* "Are you going?"

"I don't think so. I don't know anyone, really, so I don't think I'd have very much fun."

"No, probably not." *That's exactly why I'm not going. Couldn't you have guessed that?* "I don't know why they make such a big deal about dances, anyway. I can't see what's so great about them."

"No, me neither."

"Well, see you tomorrow."

"See you."

"Are you going to the dance, Kary?" "Are you going to the dance, Kary?" Why does anyone care what I do? "You should have better study habits, Kary." "You should be more sociable, Kary." "You shouldn't go through the ravine, Kary." "Don't let me down, Kary."

She slammed her locker door shut. *I'll show them. Kary Hill is going to do what she wants to do from now on. And if no one likes me, I'll show them who cares!*

* * *

Mrs Dohler drove up in front of their house at precisely 7:30, with a large green thing in the back seat which Kary assumed was Trevor in his dragon costume.

"Have fun, dear," said her mother. "And don't forget to thank Mrs. Dohler."

"I won't, Mom. Bye."

Mrs. Dohler started talking as soon as Kary got into the car, and didn't stop until she let them off at the school.

"Oh, what a lovely costume you have. Do you like Trevor's? I sewed it myself. It took me ages and ages, but I'm quite pleased with the result. I think he makes a smashing dragon."

Kary felt sorry for Trevor, but she preferred Mrs. Dohler's annoying chatter to the awkward silence that would ensue if she were required to carry the conversation.

"Now the two of you behave yourselves, do you hear? And have fun. And Trevor, I expect you to win best costume tonight, you know that."

There was a struggle to get the dragon out of the back seat, and then Mrs. Dohler was gone, and an awkward silence ensued. Kary did not want to walk up to the door with Trevor and his tail, but she didn't seem to have a choice. As soon as they got in, however, she excused herself.

"Have to go to the bathroom and fix my costume. See you later." And she escaped, leaving the dragon standing forlornly in the hallway.

She took long enough in the bathroom that Trevor gave up and went in by himself. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the empty hallway; then she had to take another deep breath, for courage. She felt naked in her costume, and she could scarcely force herself to walk down the hall towards the gym door.

Luckily, Lynne was one of the ticket takers. She was dressed as Robin Hood, or Peter Pan--it was hard to tell which--and she looked incredibly feminine and cute in the little green cap.

"Is that you, Kary?" she exclaimed. "What a great costume! Here, let me stamp your hand. Hardly anyone is here yet, but we expected that. No one ever comes until nine or so. What to you think of the decorations?"

Kary gazed into the darkened gym. Through the cobwebs and spiders hanging down from the door, she had glimpses of black and orange crepe paper, eerie green and yellow lights, and a skeleton--or something. "It looks like a haunted house in there! You did a great job."

"Thanks!" said Lynne, genuinely appreciating the compliment. "Oh, here comes another Marilyn Monroe. They must have had a sale on blond wigs or something! Oh, look! It's Peter! What a great idea, Peter--you had me convinced you were a girl for a minute there."

"Was it my hairy chest that gave it away?"

Kary felt superfluous, so she drifted into the gym.

"See you later, Kary," called Lynne.

It really was impressive, the way they'd done it up. As Kary moved away from the light that spilled in through the doorway, she became aware of the fragments of colored light playing over the walls, cast from the mirrored ball on the ceiling. At the far end of the gym, a magical fog bubbled up and drifted onto the floor from two large cauldrons of root beer. Most of the people who were there already were gathered around the root beer and the snack bar; rhythmic music was blaring from the speakers on the stage, but no one would start dancing until the right number of people arrived and some mysterious signal winged through the room, letting everyone know it was time to begin. A supressed tension quivered through the darkened room to the beat of the drums; anything could happen tonight, whispered the clumps of costumes to each other; anything could happen, grinned the skeletons hanging from the wall; anything.

Kary wandered over to the snack table, looking for someone she knew, but there was only Trevor the dragon, so she got herself a root beer and hung around, waiting for someone to talk to her.

Two hours later she was still hanging around, waiting for someone to talk to her. Energy filled the room: the floor vibrated with it, costumed bodies swayed and twisted to it, the mirrored ball spun off colored bits of it to play across the livened faces and limbs of the dancers. Kary stood on the outskirts of this whirling, beating world of unearthly creatures, feeling like the ugly older sister in all the fairy tales, the one who never saw the magic, or could never get it to work right and had frogs and snakes fall out of her mouth instead of diamonds and flowers. Cinderellas and Prince Charmings of every description were meeting and dancing away into happily ever after while she stood at the snack bar drinking root beer.

She couldn't figure out what she was doing wrong. Everyone else was dancing--except for Trevor, of course, and a few other oddities who clung to the snack bar as if it was their lifeboat. But she wasn't one of them: she deliberately stood apart from their lonely cluster, trying to look interested and involved rather than bored and depressed. She thought she was sending out the right signals: "Come talk to me, come dance with me. I'm available, I like to dance." But obviously no one was receiving them. Sonya came by once to show off her butterfly costume and chatter about how much fun it all was, and Lynne stopped by a few times to ask her if she was enjoying herself, but other than the odd wave or "hi" from someone in her class, that was all the response she got. She even periodically made her way around the gym, weaving through the crowds of people, waiting for one to open up and take her in, but she always ended up back by the root beer.

The highlight of the evening came when the Fab Four, as they were sometimes called, showed up to reveal their long awaited costume. They had arranged everything with the D.J.: just before their grand entrance, the dance music stopped and a strange, Arabian-sounding song began playing. With the spotlight trained on the doorway, Jessica entered, all in white, lounging on a litter carried by four tall boys in white loin cloths, her long black hair in a thousand small braids glittering with gold. The other three followed on foot, dressed in filmy pastel robes, scattering rose petals on either side. It was spectacular; Jessica was incredibly beautiful as Cleopatra. After the initial oohing and aahing was milked to its utmost by a procession around the gym, Cleopatra motioned to her bearers and they set her down in the middle of the dance floor. The D.J. played "King Tut," and "Walk Like an Egyptian," and the party continued at an even higher pitch of excitement and festivity.

Kary watched the proceedings with a thrilling ache in her gut. It was so beautiful, so right. All the elements came together: they looked right, they said the right things, they danced right; and they basked in the attention of the crowd, becoming more beautiful for being admired. She couldn't envy them--it would be like envying the Queen. They were just an entirely different sort of being, and Kary was of the kind who were to watch and admire, never to join, never to imitate.

"Well, guess who's going to win best costume," came a voice from behind her.

Kary turned, expecting a dragon. But no--it was a knight in shining armour--or, rather, a knight in a cardboard box covered with tinfoil and blinking lights--oh--it was a robot. The inhabitant of the box took Kary's speechlessness as admiration.

"Do you like it? I made it myself. It took me hours and hours to connect up all the circuits for the lights. And look here . . ." He pressed a switch at his side, and a large white light on his head blinked rapidly in an unintelligible pattern. "It's Morse code. It's an S.O.S. message to the spaceship, warning them not to land."

"That's really great, Norm," she enthused weakly. *How am I going to get away from him? Once he gets started on circuits and lights and spaceships, there's no stopping him.* "Look, Norman, I have to go to the ladies' powder room. Can you excuse me?"

"Oh, sure."

Thank heavens for bathrooms, she thought, on the way down the hallway. The bright lights and dull, puce features of the hall seemed a world away from the dark intensity of the gym; even the music, muted by the school's concrete walls, sounded like it came from some other time, some further dimension that was fading out of reality as she distanced herself from it. And as the magic in the gym dropped further and further behind her, she felt her mood sink lower and lower. At least she could borrow some of the excitement of the dancers when she watched them, and pretend she was having a good time. Now, alone in the echoing puce school, she felt more small and insignificant than she had standing on the edge of the dance floor.

I don't belong here, she told the bathroom mirror. Kohl-darkened eyes stared back at her and asked, *Where do you belong?* She fled from the bathroom back to the dance and stood again in the corner, shivering in the draft from the exit door which had just been opened to cool off the sweating dancers.

The next time she saw Trevor she pushed her way through the crowds to get to him.

"When is your Mom coming to pick us up?"

"I said I'd call her when I was ready to go home."

"Do you want to go home now?"

"I'm supposed to stay until the costume contest."

"We'll just pretend you won--best monster category or something."

"But I have no prize."

"It was a chocolate bar. You ate it."

It was difficult to read the expression in the dragon's eyes as he accepted her solution. She hoped he sounded relieved.

"All right, so long as you back me up. I'll go call her."

So Trevor the dragon won best monster costume and ate his prize, and Kary was carried off into the castle in the sky by the handsome prince. What a great dance.

Chapter 7 -- The Map

"Are you finished this month's book report yet?" asked Louise next Monday morning before class.

"Not quite," Kary answered. "It's not due until tomorrow."

"What did you do it on this time?"

"*Harriet the Spy* . Have you read it?"

"Yes. I didn't like it much. I thought Harriet was too nasty sometimes. I didn't understand her."

"That's what I liked about the book. Harriet is tough. Everyone was nasty to her and she fought right back."

"But it was all her fault to begin with," Louise argued. "Why did she write such horrible things about everyone anyway?"

"I guess that was kind of dumb," Kary replied, "but it's not so much that she wrote them, it's just that she did it so obviously. I would never let people see me writing anything."

"Would you ever write things like that?" Louise asked, a little incredulously.

Fortunately the bell rang just then, so Kary was spared having to reply. *Sometimes, when I'm angry enough,* is what she was thinking. *But it wouldn't do me any good. Look what it did to Harriet, and she's a lot stronger than I am. If I got ostracized like that, I think I'd die. It's bad enough being a nobody without having everyone hate you.*

That morning they had science first thing, and the class was beginning a new unit on geology. *Rocks. How exciting,* was Kary's first reaction. But they were going to do something different today, something that might even be fun.

"I'd like you to get into groups of two or three," Mr. Lee explained in his soft but no-nonsense voice. "Each group can come over to the side bench here and pick up a tray of rock samples. You will have to write up a lab report describing the different features of each rock: its size, shape, color, texture, the patterns you find in it. If you don't finish in this class period you'll have to get together with your group outside of class time. You may begin."

As the teacher talked, the students sent mysterious signals between one another to indicate who wanted to work with who. When he finished speaking, it was only a moment before everyone was in groups except for Kary, Louise, and Norman.

Oh, no, not Norman, Kary thought to herself, realizing as she thought it how funny it sounded.

"Can the three of you work together?" asked Mr. Lee, and of course they could. They didn't have much choice.

"Hi, guys," said Norman. "I'll go get our tray, okay? Hey--that rhymes! I'll go get our tray, okay?"

"Thanks, Norman," Louise said nicely, and Norman bounced off to get the tray. Kary rolled her eyes at Louise.

"Of all people to get stuck with," she whispered.

Louise looked surprised. "He's not that bad. At least he's smart."

The rational side of Kary's brain agreed with Louise that it was better to work with smart, if somewhat goofy, people than with cool, dumb ones, but her other half kept muttering things like, *Great. I'm stuck with the nerd group. Kary the nerd. And this after my brilliant success at the dance.*

Louise was right. Once he settled down to work and stopped bouncing, Norman was really helpful. The fact that he knew all the scientific names for each type of rock and would rattle them off uselessly every chance he got was only mildly annoying, and was more than made up for by his knowledge of where each rock came from and why it looked the way it did.

"How do you know all this?" Kary asked, in spite of herself. She didn't want to encourage his showing off, but she was genuinely curious.

"I have a rock collection at home. My Dad brings me back samples from everywhere he travels. I'm going to be a geophysicist, so I have to know all about rocks."

"I thought you were going to be an astronaut," Louise interjected.

"Oh, yes, but you have to be something else before you can be an astronaut. Geophysics is really useful for space exploration. They're going to start building mines on the moon, you know."

Kary didn't know. It was wonderful how sure Norman was of his future. He was so awkward and out of place in school, and yet he knew exactly what he wanted to be and how to become it. His enthusiasm for the subject made the rocks they were classifying much more fascinating, and the period flew by.

Kary had almost managed to shut off her 'nerd alert' because of her interest in the project. When they finished all the rocks, however, a guy in the neighboring group commented that "of course they're done already," and she clenched up angrily inside once again. *I don't want to be one of 'them.' If I'm one of the 'brains' then no one else will ever want to talk to me, except to get help with homework. Of course, that's all anyone ever wants to talk to me about anyway.* She sighed. *Not that I know what else there is to talk about.*

On the way home she tried to decide what her problem was. *"Why is Kary a Nerd?"* she titled her analysis. The sky was grey and heavy with snow, and it glowered over her as she trudged down into the ravine. Leafless branches seemed to hang in the air; the world hovered in the balance between autumn and winter, and any minute now winter was going to win.

What is a nerd? Someone smart. Well, I can't very well help being smart. And other smart people aren't nerds. So, what else? Someone with no friends. Yes, but why don't they have friends? That's the crucial question. Because they have no social skills. I suppose that's the clincher: a nerd is a smart person with no social skills. That's me all *right. But why don't I have any social skills? How does one go about learning to make friends?*

This was getting her nowhere.

Brian wasn't a nerd. Of course, he didn't do very well in school, so maybe that's why. But he spent all his time practising the piano and rehersing with his band, so it's not like he went to a lot of parties or anything. Yet people liked him. Why don't people like me? Well, all right, some people do, but I'm hardly what you'd call popular.

A few random flakes of snow began to fall. *I suppose musicians are always more popular than writers. Not that I'm really a writer. Maybe that's my problem. I'm not really much of anything. I just sort of float around: Kary the nobody.*

She was about to turn into her secret path to return to the only place where she felt she belonged, the only place she could be just Kary and it was all right. But the snow was falling more thickly now, and she noticed that she was leaving footprints on the path behind her. If she went up her secret path, people would see by the footprints that there was a path there, and it wouldn't be secret any more. Reluctantly she continued down the path towards home. *That means I won't be able to visit it all winter. What a bummer.*

But as she thought longingly of her secret place and the way it filled a void deep inside her, she realized that there was another secret place to which she could go any time she wanted to find the same peace and fulfillment. The world in which a boy called Deven was adventuring along a forest path was also a place where Kary felt completely at home, completely herself. When she picked up her pen and began recording the pictures that flowed across her mind, she became immersed in a wonderful story that came from directly inside her, bubbling up out of her deepest being and flowing through her onto the paper. There it became something separate, something foreign that she could like or dislike, change and improve, but those judgements also came from her very heart, and seemed good to her.

I may not be a writer, but I love to write, she decided, feeling much better about herself already. So, instead of turning up the path to her clearing, she went home and journeyed to the forest where the path led to a witches' cottage, where Deven was explaining to one witch about his search for his real father. And the story opened itself up to her; she saw how the new story fit in with the old, she saw Deven's path traced out on the map she had rediscovered, and she felt for the first time the story as a whole, every part necessary and all of it meaningful. It was a beautiful thing in her mind, and the joy of discovery sent her imagination spinning.

The map! That's what the witch can give Deven to help him on his journey: that's all he needs from her, because the second witch will come home soon so that Deven can overhear where the Princess was hidden; of course, he will have to be hidden somehow so she doesn't see him . . . Feeling on fire with ideas and new directions for the story, she opened her notebook with a new sense of purpose and energy.

"Seeking your true parentage," the sorceress repeated. "I think you will not find it in these mountains."

"I am going to the (Palace City), on the other side of the mountains."

"Do you have a map to guide you there?"

No, he didn't. He had just assumed the path would lead him there eventually; he didn't know of any other place to which the path could go.

The woman went into another room and returned with a large piece of parchment. "This is a map of Caralisle. Have you ever seen one?"

Deven shook his head. The map she showed him was full of crude symbols representing mountains and rivers, and lines and dots that presumably were roads and cities; he was amazed at how many of them there were. He hadn't known the kingdom was so large. She pointed to a dot with the name 'Dell' beside it. "Here is the village you must have come from. And here is the path you followed."

As Deven stared at the map it became a little clearer. Once he had oriented himself he could interpret the rest of the markings. He had only known such a small part of Caralisle: on this map he could cover with his thumb all the places with which he was familiar. It took him only a moment to realize that the Palace City was many days' journey away, and his heart sank within him at the thought of the large distance he had left to travel.

"You see that this path divides in two not much further on. You must keep to the left. Here is where you will join onto the main trade route through the mountains. If you go to the right back here, you will soon be lost in a wild and dangerous part of the forest. The whole forest is quite dangerous, in fact, so you must try and get to the main road as soon as possible. Do you understand?"

Deven nodded. He was staring at the map, imprinting its shapes onto his mind, memorizing the names of places he had never heard of before but would likely be visiting before his quest was through. The magnitude of his task overwhelmed him, and had he not felt an equally strong desire to see these places that were only dots on the map, he would have given up in despair.

When he thought he had it all in his head, he looked up to tell the old woman. She was standing by the door, listening intently. Suddenly she whirled around and approached Deven, her face anxious.

"She's coming. And there's no time to get you out of here." Standing right before him, she spread her fingers in front of his face. "Close your eyes."

He did so. Presently he felt a strange, ticklish sensation spread upwards from his toes, and suddenly he felt very off-balance, as if his legs were too small to support his body. He reached out his hands to steady himself, only they weren't hands any more.

"Easy now," came the woman's voice strangely into his ears. His eyes flew open. Her face seemed very close to his. "Ive turned you into a sparrow--only temporarily--it was the only thing I could think of. Oh! Here she comes. You need a cage."

With a strange gesture of her free hand (Deven was perched on the other one), she conjured up a small wicker cage hanging from the roof. "In you go," she said softly, gently nudging Deven until he had to take a step in order not to fall over. He stepped into the cage, which she promptly locked behind him before turning to greet the woman coming through the door.

Deven sat on his perch in the cage, blinking in astonishment. It felt very strange to be a bird. The ground was disconcertingly far away, for one thing. And it was difficult to adjust to these large things sprouting from his shoulders that took the place of his arms. His nose was itchy, which was ridiculous, because he no longer had a nose, nor hands to scratch it.

To divert his attention away from such annoyances, he tried to concentrate his bird-vision on the figure entering the cottage. She looked nothing like the silver-haired woman who had seemed so kindly to Deven. Her hair was black, and her nose was long and pointed. In contrast with the first woman's tall, elegant stature, she seemed shrunken, drawn up inside herself, as though she were very old, even though her face seemed relatively young. Deven knew his hostess must be a witch because of what she had done to him; this woman he could tell was a witch just by looking at her.

--I like the bird: what fun! I wonder what happened to his clothes, though. At any rate, I need names for these characters; this is getting awkward. Witch #1 and #2 won't work. Neither will Good Witch and Bad Witch, because Deven doesn't know whether the one who turned him into a bird is good or not, and I shouldn't give it away. Which reminds me, I should go back to Deven's approach to the cottage and make it a lot more ominous-sounding: wolves slinking through the trees, eerie shadows, or something like that. And the cottage itself can't look so cheery and welcoming. But back to the names. I guess the first witch will introduce herself to Deven when he first comes in, and he'll catch the second one's name in the conversation. What are some nice witchy names, one evil, one not so bad. . . . All right: Ridach and Morag will do.

The two witches looked like each other's opposites. "Like night and day," Deven thought. "Or, no: like darkness and moonlight."

All this passed through his head as Morag's sister swept into the room and stopped, pointing accusingly at Morag.

"I can smell magic! What have you been doing?"

Morag smiled innocently. "I made this cage for my bird, Ridach. I caught him today, and had nowhere to keep him."

Ridach approached Deven's cage and poked at it with her long fingers. Deven shivered. When she was this close he could see her small black eyes, her long black hair, her sharp nose, and he could sense her maliciousness.

"Humph," she said, turning away. "You're better than I thought you were." Then she cackled. "But it'll only last 'til sunrise, I guarantee it!"

Deven relaxed as she got further from the cage and seemed to forget about him. He could still hear her perfectly well, however, and her conversation amazed and horrified him.

"You'll never guess what a pretty little prize I got myself today!" she challenged her sister.

Morag replied in a calm, expressionless voice. "I can't imagine, Ridach. What did you get?"

Ridach cackled and seemed to dance about the room. "I won't tell! I won't tell! It's my secret. Soon everyone will know what I've got, but no one will ever find her. Do you know why? Because she's in the Swamp of Sinmole! No one knows where the Swamp of Sinmole is any more, and even if they do find the swamp, I made sure they won't find what I've hidden there."

"How did you manage that?" asked Morag innocently.

"Oh, ho, wouldn't you like to know! But I'll tell you, because you can't do anything about it. It's such a clever spell. No one can believe what they see. That's it.

That's the spell. Can you see how it works? They might wander around my tower for weeks, but they won't be able to believe it's really there, so they won't see it!"

"That ***is*** *clever. I never would have thought of such a thing."*

"No, you couldn't. That's why you're stuck here and I'm on my way to rule the kingdom!"

An owl hooted outside, and Ridach was suddenly silent. The fire had burnt down and the room was quite dark. She went into another room of the cottage and lit a lamp that sent an eerie green glow through the doorway. Strange shadows leaped up from the cauldrons on the table, and Deven was frightened. He was completely at the mercy of these two powerful women. All seemed lost.

But after a few moments, when it was apparant that Ridach wasn't coming out again, Morag slipped silently over to Deven and picked up his cage. "We have to get you out of here," she whispered as she carried him towards the door. "Ridach is right. My spell will fail when the sun comes up, and if you aren't well out of the way by then, she will discover you."

They were outside, and she was opening his cage. "You see that tall tree down where the path curves? Fly to that tree. When you get to the bottom of it, I will return you to your natural shape. You will find your clothes and belongings hidden among the tree roots. Do not linger there. Walk quickly all night long. You will be safe if you make it to the main road by morning. Otherwise I can make no promises."

"Morag? What are you doing out there?" came a harsh voice from inside the cottage.

"My bird escaped. I'm looking for him," Morag called back. "Hurry!" she whispered to Deven. "Fly."

Deven hopped to the entrance of the cage and instinctively unfolded his wings. Before he knew what he was doing, he was fluttering through the air, looking for a place to perch. "The tall tree," Morag hissed at him, and he swooped around until he saw it ahead *of him. Flying in little flutters and darts, because that was the way his wings seemed to work, he made his way to the base of the tree.*

And suddenly he was very cold, because he was crouched naked on the ground, in human form again. There were his clothes, just as she had said, on the other side of the tree. How had she got them there? As he dressed himself, he thought nervously, "If she is this powerful, and Ridach is even more powerful than her, Ridach really could rule the kingdom if she wanted to. And she could certainly kill me if she found out I was here."

He threw his bag over his shoulder and was about to head down the path when he remembered his ring. Where was it? Quickly he bent down to search the ground where his clothes had been, but it was so dark he could easily pass right over it without seeing it. He searched through the pockets of his clothes and through his bag, hoping perhaps Morag would have put it somewhere safe, but he could find it nowhere. "I can't leave without it," he thought despairingly, imagining that every second he waited put him in greater danger of discovery by Ridach.

At that moment, the door of the cottage opened, and he froze behind the tree. A shadowy figure emerged and slipped down the path towards Deven with remarkable swiftness. He tried to stop breathing, but it was too late; the hooded witch came straight to his hiding place. He let out his breath in a sigh of relief. It was Morag.

"I found this on the floor of the cottage," she whispered, holding out his ring. "It must be a very powerful talisman, for I could not send it to the tree with your other belongings: my magic has no power over it." She paused, staring closely at him. "I do not know who you are, or where you got this, but I believe there is a reason why you came here this night of all nights. You have a strange destiny, and this ring is leading you towards it. I think you will be protected from harm on your journey."

"Thank you," whispered Deven, but she was already halfway back to the cottage. He slipped the ring on its chain around his neck and immediately set off down the path at a steady lope. The sooner he got out of this forest, the better.

Kary finished writing the scene and flipped back through the pages she had written. There were a lot of them already. She enjoyed watching the clean, white pages of the notebook be transformed into inky, doodled messes: it was a sign of progress. *This story is really becoming a substantial entity*, she thought with pride, noting how the notebook cover was becoming worn with use.

It was a good thing her story was going so well. After the fiasco of the Halloween Dance, Kary retreated further and further from the day-to-day happenings of school, and Caralisle was a very pleasant place to retreat to. When she wasn't writing new scenes, she was revising old ones, or imagining future turnings of the plot. Her days began to pass in a bit of a blur as she ignored everything around her and looked forward only to getting home and continuing to write.

The next time Kary went into the ravine, a few weeks had passed, and it was completely changed. What before had been brown and grey and occasionally yellow and red was now grey and white. Bare tree branches lifted above the snow. As Kary descended slowly, careful not to slip on the snowy path, she could hear her own breathing, loud in the empty air, and she realized that there was no wind at all. Earth and sky seemed to be holding still, as if waiting to see what this new state of winter would be like.

She stopped at the bottom of the ravine and listened to the silence. All around her, leafless branches stuck sharply up into the blue, blue sky. No tiny rustlings filled the spaces between the trees; deprived of leaves they were deprived of a voice, but their silence was even more eloquent. A sense of tree-ness surrounded her, as if, in their nakedness, the trees were more fully themselves. Walking through the woods she noticed how each tree was its own shape, its own height, had its own number and size of branches curving up or curving down, and yet each was completely and perfectly a tree. They were beautiful, and Kary ached inside to see their beauty.

You're real, aren't you, she thought, to the trees, to the world, to herself. *You're real, and I'm real too. This is me.* She felt as though the trees had given her a gift. What it was she didn't know, but she felt the same kind of inexplicable happiness as she did when she was writing.

Emerging from the ravine into the alleyway a few blocks from her house, Kary began searching for words to describe the trees and how they had made her feel. The rest of the way home her mind was focussed on the image of branches curving against the sky. Slowly, a poem began forming inside her, word upon word, shaping the ephemeral feeling into something solid, a crystalline form shimmering and winking in the depths of her soul. This she would keep always and take out once in a while to watch the fractures of light play over her face in the darkness.

Still cradling the new poem inside her, she slipped into the back door of her house and tiptoed upstairs. She felt that if anything disturbed her before she wrote the poem down it would shatter and melt away, leaving her more cold and empty than she had ever been. Just as she reached the door of her room, however, she heard her mother's voice.

"Kary, is that you?"

She couldn't very well deny it. "Yes."

Her mother came into the doorway of the master bedroom. "How was your day?"

"Fine, Mom, just fine." It was slipping away from her every second. "I've got a lot of homework I need to do."

"That can wait a few minutes, can't it? I hardly ever talk to you any more. You always disappear into your room and never come out until dinner, and we can't really talk at dinner."

Deeper and deeper the poem fell into the darkness. Kary could hardly see it any more. Her mother sounded tired, disappointed, almost guilty. She was probably on the verge of another bout of depression; they seemed to be coming more frequently now. Tom in two, Kary hesitated at her bedroom door. She didn't want to deal with her mother's sadness and guilt; she couldn't deal with it. Her mother sensed her hesitation.

"Go ahead and do your homework, dear. Of course that's more important. I need to start fixing dinner anyway."

Relieved, yet a little ashamed, Kary offered to help with dinner, knowing she would be refused.

"No, no," her mother said, heading downstairs. "You do your work, and I'll do mine. Go on."

And Kary escaped into her room. The poem, however, was gone. All that remained was a lingering warmth and a silvery trail showing where it had been. Sitting in front of a blank piece of paper, trying to recapture the image, the words, she felt a great hole inside her. It was beautiful, and it was lost. A wave of anger washed through her, anger and frustration, but that was soon replaced by contrition. *How could I be so selfish? It was just a poem. Now I've made Mom all depressed and thinking that I don't care about her. As if my poems were more important--as if they were important at all!* Her thoughts were black and confused, and a heavy weight seemed to rest upon her; the muscles in her stomach curled up into a familiar tenseness. Angry at herself now, she threw down the pen and went downstairs to the kitchen where her mother was peeling potatoes.

"Let me do that, Mom."

"Kary. I thought you were doing homework."

"It can wait. Besides, I'd rather help you." She felt awkward as she said it, and her mother replied as awkwardly.

"Oh. Well, here. If you do the potatoes, I can start on the meat."

"Okay."

They worked together in silence, for neither could think of anything else to say.

"There. Do you want me to put these on to boil now?"

"Yes, thanks, Kary. Use the big black pot."

Kary filled the pot with water and sliced the potatoes into it. *The witch measured her herbs into the cauldron, muttering an evil spell.*

"Kary?"

"Yes, Mom?"

"Is everything going okay, really?"

Kary was quick to reply. "Oh, yes, I'm doing okay. Remember that math test you made me study for? I got 78 percent on it."

"Oh, good! You have Brian's old math teacher, don't you."

"Yeah, Mrs. Richards. She's pretty mean."

"Brian used to hate her so much. And yet at parent teacher interviews she always seemed so pleasant. She would tell me Brian could do so much better if he just worked hard, and so I would go home and bawl him out for being lazy, and he would just look at me with those dark, deep eyes, and go play some of his horrible music on the piano." Her voice got sadder and sadder as she lost herself in recollection. Kary was frightened by the despairing look in her mother's eyes.

"Mom, it's not your fault he left, you know that."

Her mother turned her lost eyes to her daughter and seemed to struggle back to the present. "No, maybe not." But she didn't sound convinced.

"Mom! The meat's burning."

With a sudden shake of her head, her mother left the past behind and turned to the stove. Soon Megan and father were home, and all chance at conversation was over.

Chapter 8 -- The Journey

"Hi, Kary. How's it going?"

Kary turned from her locker. A boy in faded jeans and a sweatshirt was looking at her expectantly. At first she didn't recognize him, but then she remembered where she had seen him before. It was the boy she had hidden from in the ravine several weeks ago. *How does he know me?*

"Remember me? Trevor the dragon?"

"Oh!" *Trevor was the boy in the ravine?* "I didn't recognize you without your tail." *What a stupid thing to say.*

"For a minute there you looked like you'd seen a ghost."

"Oh, well, you startled me." *Of course it's Trevor. Why didn't I recognize him at the dance?* She turned back to her locker to hide her confusion. *For heaven's sake, Kary, stop acting like a fool. Why shouldn't Trevor walk through the ravine? He lives on the other side. Now say something intelligent, for once.*

"Well, see you around," Trevor said, after an awkward pause.

"Yeah, see you," Kary replied quickly, trying to sound nonchalant. *I guess he didn't want to talk to me anyway.*

'Who was that, Kary?" Sonya had approached from the other end of the hallway as Trevor was walking away.

"Oh, just some guy in 7B. His Mom knows my Mom."

"I think he likes you."

"What? Don't be ridiculous."

"No, really. I've seen him watching you, in the library, and the lunch room."

Oh, terrific. "You're imagining things." Kary was a little upset at Sonya for having noticed, or invented, such a thing. It was just like her to want to manufacture an incident of some kind.

"Fine. Don't believe me. I just thought you'd want to know that someone has been making googly eyes at you all week." And she huffed off down the hall.

Now Sonya's mad at me. Why am I such a social klutz? And what if Trevor *has* *been watching me? Maybe it was a good thing I was so rude--now he'll stay away from me.*

As she walked home over the bridge her mind remained knotted up in anger against anyone who thought they knew something about Kary Hill.

It was a moonless night, and little of the cold, pale starlight filtered down through the trees to illuminate Deven's path as he made his way through the enchanted forest. He had a small candle with him, but he tried to use it only when he absolutely could not tell where the path was; the rest of the time he went by feeling and instinct. He had to go slowly, but by remembering Morag's map and following her directions, he managed to reach the main road just before sunrise. He stopped at the junction of the path and the road and found a hollow at the base of a tree to curl up in and sleep, completely exhausted by the evening's adventures.

When he awoke, the sun was high in the sky, and the events of the previous evening seemed like a bad dream. Although he remembered very clearly what it felt like to be a bird, and although Ridach's harsh cackle still rang in his ears, he had a hard time believing it had all really happened.

"Whatever the case," he told himself as he ate a bit of the bread and cheese he had brought with him, "it doesn't matter now. I must concentrate on crossing these mountains, getting to the city and beginning my search. Whether it was a dream or not, I hope it has left me on the right path." Refreshed by his sleep and his breakfast, feeling strong and adventuresome, he set off along the road towards (PalaceCity).

The rest of the journey passed uneventfully. Occasionally there were inns along the way, where he earned his bed and meals by chopping wood for the innkeepers' wives, and *if there was no inn, he was just as comfortable sleeping under a tree. As he came down out of the mountains and began crossing the fertile valley towards Palacit,*

--nope, that still isn't right--

he passed through more and more villages and towns, and encountered more and more people. This part of the country was much more populated than the other side of the mountains. Looking at the gently rolling green fields, Deven could understand why. The people from his village herded sheep and goats to precarious pastures on the mountain slopes. Here cows grazed peacefully in wide, green meadows watered by dark, placid streams.

"Oh, what's the point!" Kary exclaimed suddenly in frustration. Her story was meandering around aimlessly because she couldn't decide what Deven was going to do in Pala--whatever the stupid city was going to be called. "It's boring," she told Buffy, who happened to be sitting on her desk. "Plain boring. How do other writers make their stories interesting? I guess I need more exciting things to happen. But what?" She had thought that adding the story about the kidnapped princess would provide excitement enough: the hero advances through a dangerous enchanted swamp, discovers the tower and has to find a way to get in, sneaks away with the princess before the witch finds out. That was pretty interesting. But Deven still had to find out the princess was missing, decide to rescue her himself, and get to the swamp, and Kary couldn't think of how she was going to do all that without becoming boring. All the beauty of Caralisle and the importance of Deven's quest seemed to get diffused when she tried to describe it.

It's not as if it were a poem, she thought to herself. Poems were perfect. They retained their magic even after they were written down. But she didn't want to think about that. That would remind her of yesterday, of the lost poem and the emptiness in her mother's voice and the confusion in Kary's stomach. Instead she turned to look out the window at the snow-covered trees outside. Brian's tree looked particularly beautiful with its clumps of red berries topped with little caps of snow. Kary wished she could draw; she would sketch the perfect, rounded shape of the mountain ash, all white and red and brown, and all would be perfect lines and curves, always moving, always still. The picture would be as complete and whole as the tree itself: it wouldn't wriggle out of her grasp or turn and hiss at her the way she felt her story did sometimes, or the way people did.

"Kary, *Star Trek* 's on," called her mother. Taking a deep breath, Kary walked downstairs, holding the thought of a tree in her mind as if it were growing out of her feet, holding her up.

The story was left alone to contemplate its sins for several days after that. Then they began discussing plot in Language Arts, and Kary learned something.

"We're going to begin today by charting out the plots of the stories you were assigned to read. I'd like you to get into groups with the other people who read the same story as you did. I assigned the stories evenly, so there should be six groups of four people each." Miss Krawchuck sat down at her desk, confident in the class's ability to carry out her instructions without further help.

After a bit of sorting out, the groups arranged themselves. Kary was relieved to find Louise and Lynne in her group, and distressed to find Roger there. This time it was Louise who rolled her eyes at Kary.

"Well," said Lynne, "this was a pretty long story, so we'd better get started. Did everyone read it?"

"Are you kidding?" said Roger. "It's a bloody fairy tale."

"Right. Thank you, Roger, for your contribution."

Louise and Kary grinned; they had never heard Lynne be sarcastic before. She blushed a little.

"So, where do we begin," she said, business-like again. She ignored Roger for the rest of the class.

"How about at the beginning," Kary joked, and they all laughed.

"No, really, how did Miss Krawchuck say were were supposed to chart a plot?"

Louise had her notes handy and read from them, a little to Kary's frustration, because she knew quite well what the teacher wanted. "'Look at the main character at the beginning and then at the end of the story. How has he or she changed? Once you have determined the essential change in the character, go back through every event in the story and show how each event helps lead to that change.' "

"Well, the first part is pretty easy," Kary began. "He starts out the son of a poor man and ends up married to the Princess."

Lynne wrote this down in a neat, rounded hand.

"But I'm not so sure about the rest of it," said Louise. "None of the events seem to help him at all. He gets thrown in a river, the King gives a command that he be killed, he sleeps in a robbers' hut--well, that helps, because the robbers change the letter to say he should marry the princess."

"Hold on, hold on, you're going to fast!" said Lynne, who was trying to write it all down.

"Ah, but all the other things help, too, don't you see," said Kary, lighting up with discovery. "If he hadn't been thrown in the river, he wouldn't have been picked up by the miller, and if he hadn't been living with the miller, the King wouldn't have seen him and sent him off with the letter . . . "

" . . . and if he hadn't had the letter, the robbers wouldn't have pitied him and written the new letter, and he wouldn't have married the princess. I see," Louise chimed in.

"Slow down, you two!" Lynne exclaimed. "Now, let's do this in logical order. Start at the beginning again."

So they went over every step of the story slowly, giving Lynne time to record their ideas. As they talked, Kary's mind raced ahead on the track she had discovered. That was what her story needed: events that seemed to be obstacles but were really necessary for Deven to reach his goal.

Let's see. Deven wants to find his family. So if he finds out about the princess and decides he had to help find her, that will seem like it's getting in the way of his goal. The city should be an obstacle too: since he's thought all along that he'll reach the end of his quest there, it will have to seem impossible once he gets there. So he'll be even more likely to decide to give up and search for the princess instead. That's it--lots of problems that will make him give up his own quest to find the princess, because in the end that's how he's going to find his father.

"Kary? You still with us?" Louise asked. "We still have to do the second half of the story. It doesn't really fit into your theory. He's already married to the princess, but now he has to go get the gold hairs from the giant, and solve the problems of the three people he meets."

Kary felt as though a light was shining inside her brain, making everything clear. It all seemed to fit together into one big pattern. She understood the story she read, she understood the story she was writing--it was as if she had opened a door inside herself, and all the answers came pouring out.

"Now he has to be tested," she explained to the others, "to prove he's worthy to be married to the princess." Her face was animated, and her hands gestured to help her get across what she meant. "Princes always have to face some kind of monster or solve a riddle or something in order to be a real prince." *Just like Deven will have to prove his bravery, and cleverness too, maybe, by finding Tatania.*

Her enthusiasm was contagious. "Like in 'Sleeping Beauty,' the prince has to fight through the brambles and kill Malificent before he reaches the princess," Lynne said.

"Yeah," Louise added, "they always have to kill a dragon, or do three impossible tasks, or something like that. I suppose that's why this hero has to solve three riddles, and get three hairs. Three is the magic number."

"Hey, you're right," Kary realized. "Write that down, Lynne." *I wonder what Deven can do three of?*

"Why is it always the prince who has to kill the dragon and win the princess," Lynne put in. "How come princesses never get to do anything?"

"They do," said Kary. "How about Cinderella?"

"She doesn't really do anything--her fairy godmother does it all," Louise objected.

"Well, when you think about it, the guy in this story doesn't really do anything either."

"I suppose." Louise sounded unconvinced.

"All right, how about 'Beauty and the Beast'? She has to rescue the prince from an enchantment."

"Oh, I love that story," said Lynne. "It's so romantic."

The animated conversation continued, as each shared thoughts about stories they knew, comparing notes on favorite stories and books. Kary was elated, not only by her discovery of the way plot works, but by the shared excitement that discovery had brought the other girls. For once she felt as though she, Kary, could contribute something worthwhile. It didn't matter that Roger sat apart, contemptuous--who cared what Roger thought?--or that the 'cool' groups were busy talking about dances or sports or members of the opposite sex. Kary was doing what she wanted to to, and Lynne and Louise liked her for it. She found herself relaxing and enjoying the feeling of belonging to a group. *So far, so good, Kare. Maybe you can fit in, after all.*

Full of excitement about her new ideas for the plot, when she returned to her notebook that evening she drew a big 'X' through the scene describing Deven's journey, and decided to rewrite it later. Now she wanted to get on with things.

The night before Deven reached Pavalis,

--Yes! That's it!--

he stayed in a small town on a hill overlooking the city. From his room in the inn he could see it spread out in the valley below, curving around the edges of a large lake. The city was larger than Deven could have imagined. Rising in the center, right by the lakeshore, was a beautiful white building full of turrets and towers, balconies and balustrades. From this distance it looked like a multifaceted jewel catching the rays of the setting sun.

"That's the royal palace you can see there," the innkeeper's wife said as she came into the room with hot water for him to wash with. "Didn't I say it was a splendid view?"

It was indeed. Deven gazed out the window for a long time, trying to take in all the sights. Then he went down to supper, hoping to learn from the stories of other travellers what the city was like. Now that he was this close to his goal, he wasn't sure what to do next. How did one go about finding one's family in a city that big?

It wasn't the city that Deven learned about at supper, however. The inkeeper's wife laid down his plate of stew and mug of beer and stopped to share the news, as he had hoped she would, but the news was unexpected.

"You won't have heard about the princess, then, will you?" she asked, hoping he hadn't so she would be able to tell him first.

"What about the princess?" Deven asked, with obvious interest.

The woman grinned with the pleasure of telling her tale. "The Princess Tatania, youngest of them all and most beautiful, has been missing for a week."

"Missing!" Deven and a few other listeners-in exclaimed at once.

"Aye. Kidnapped is what they're sayin'. They've got soldiers scouring the country, looking for her. But mark my words," she leaned forward and her voice sank, " 'tisn't men or horses that'll find her now. 'Tis magic as stole her away, and only magic will get her back!"

She got the intended effect, for her listeners all gasped with astonishment and fear. Deven thought immediately of the two witches in the forest. He had convinced himself *they were part of a dream, but the more the inkeeper's wife talked, the more he wondered if they weren't real after all.*

"She disappeared a week ago," the woman continued, "on the night of the new moon--now, I know there's some as would say 'tis the full moon that breeds black magic, but I say the moon is white, and witches love darkness. That's my first clue. My second clue is that they haven't found her yet. Mark my words, she'll be turned invisible, or something worse, by now. I don't think they'll ever find her."

Deven certainly did mark her words. He remembered Morag and Ridach's conversation very clearly, dream or no, and was now quite sure he knew what Ridach's "pretty little prize" was. "Have they looked in the Swamp of Sinmole yet?" he asked.

"Bless the boy!" exclaimed the woman. "That's just a legend. It's not a real place. Although you've got a point--what better place for a witch to hide a princess than a swamp that doesn't exist!" She thoroughly enjoyed her joke, and went on to share it with the next table.

Deven was confused. He could see Morag's map in his mind's eye as clearly as if it were before him, and there was the Swamp of Sinmole, in the top right corner. It couldn't be a dream: that would be too much of a coincidence. He wanted to ask if there was a map of the kingdom he could look at, but the woman was gone, and his neighbors were busy discussing the news amongst themselves.

"You don't really believe in witchcraft, do you?" one stocky, bearded man was asking his companion. "That's just a lot of old wives' tales."

The other man agreed. "More likely the Princess was kidnapped by some foreign prince who was struck by her beauty. She's supposed to be the most beautiful of them all, you know."

The conversation turned into an argument about which princess was most beautiful, and Deven stopped listening. He didn't particularly care how beautiful the princesses were--so he told himself--but he did care that one of them was missing and he might know *where she was. That is, if the witches weren't just a dream, if Ridach had really been talking about the princess, and if this Swamp of Sinmole were a real place, and not just Ridach's name for something else. That was a lot of 'if's. But what if they were all true? Then he would be the only one who knew what had happened to the princess.*

Back in his room after supper, when all was dark, he stood by the window gazing down at the royal city. It had been transformed into a glittering crescent of tiny lights that reflected in the lake. As the bright half moon rose into the starry sky that seemed to reflect the scene below, Deven knew he had never seen anything more beautiful. His own quest seemed small and trivial compared to the concerns of those who slept in the glowing white walls below. The fate of a princess and a kingdom hung in the balance, and Deven, insignificant as he was, held the key to it. It was too much for his confused mind to handle, so he left the glittering city to the quiet night and went to bed.

The next day he woke up to a beautiful summer morning. The sky was blue, birds were chattering all around, and a fresh, green smell came through the open window. Pavalis, bathed in morning sunlight, beckoned to him like a city in a dream. He couldn't wait to get there. It seemed as if the answers to all his problems must lie within those colorful walls. Somehow all would be right if he could make it to Pavalis.

This is all right, Kary thought to herself. *I think I've set up his dilemma okay, although he doesn't know it yet. Now I have to give him more reasons to look for the princess, and some good reasons not to look for his family, so he'll really have a hard time deciding what to do. Then, when he decides to go for the princess, he can prove himself by making it to the Swamp and dealing with whatever turns out to be in his way when he gets there.*

Her story seemed to have a lot more energy now that she had a sense of its shape. She had always thought writers just let the ideas flow, but she was learning that ideas needed lots of thought and conscious direction to tame them into a story. She felt almost as though she was wrestling with a dragon, and it was an exhilerating feeling. Once again she read over the passage she had written, this time aloud, to see if it sounded as good as she hoped it did.

"What are you doing, Kary?" Megan interrupted, standing at Kary's open door.

"None of your business," Kary replied, embarrassed and angry to have been caught with her story.

"What was that you were reading? You're not making up stories again, are you?"

"No, I'm not 'making up stories,' and what do you care, anyway?"

"I don't know," Megan replied sarcastically. "Why should I care that I've got a weirdo for a sister, who everyone says is a total snob. It's not like Brian is enough to deal with."

"What do you mean, everyone says I'm a snob? Who says that?"

"Some of my friends' younger sisters and brothers go to your school. They all say you never talk to anyone, and you always make out like you're smarter than everyone. They say you're a teacher's pet." Megan reeled off the accusations in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"Teacher's pet? How can they say that when Mrs. Richard's picks on me almost every day? I don't get it."

"All I know is you're contributing to my reputation of having a completely screwy family, and I don't appreciate it." Having delivered her salvo, Megan marched off to her own room and slammed the door.

Kary felt hot tears rising, and fiercely swallowed them down. *Why does she hate me so much? Why does everyone hate me? Nerd I can understand, but snob?* She thought back to the morning's L.A. class. *Was I making out like I was smarter than everyone then? I hope not. Louise and Lynne couldn't possibly think I'm a snob, could they? Roger, maybe, but he doesn't count.* Her enjoyment of the whole day was ruined by worry about what everyone thought of everything she did. *It's not fair. If I don't say* *anything, I'm a snob, and if I do talk I'm a conceited brain. How am I supposed to be normal when I can't do anything right?*

Sadly she closed her notebook. She had too many other dragons to wrestle with. *How can I prove that I'm an okay person? Am I an okay person? How will I ever fit in?*

Chapter 9 -- The City

So Deven set off down the hill towards Pavalis, accompanied by sunshine and birdsong. What he was going to do when he got there, he had no idea. His mind ought to have been full of his quest for his family, and how he was to go about finding them, but instead all he could think about was Princess Tatania, locked away in Ridach's tower in the middle of the Swamp of Sinmole. He thought about the inkeeper's wife's laughing response to his suggestion that they look for her there. "I've got to tell someone," he thought. "There must be someone who will believe me."

The sun was high in the sky by the time he reached the outskirts of the city. The road had steadily gotten busier, and now Deven was in the middle of a large crowd of people and animals, all moving towards the center of the city. He had never seen so many people in the same place all at once. The noise was overwhelming to a boy used to the silences of trees. So was the smell. People smells, animal smells, garbage smells, food smells; talking, shouting, calling, braying, clucking, clopping, jingling, murmuring, sizzling. As the street got closer to the center of the city, there were more and more stands and booths set up on either side, with people calling out their wares--everything from fresh meat to fabric to books. Deven had never seen so many things together in the same place.

He let himself be carried along by the crowd until the street opened out into a huge open square, completely filled with people and booths and animals. It was an amazing sight. Deven stopped in wonder and let the crowd mill past him. Buildings surrounded the square on all four sides, and roads entered it from every direction. Beyond the buildings on the far side of the square, the white towers of the palace rose up, breathtakingly beautiful against the deep blue sky.

Deven eventually had to move out of the way, so he found a relatively empty corner to stand in and watch. A wine vendor had chosen that corner to set up his stand, and Deven suddenly realized how thirsty the sun and the dust had made him. He spent part of a *coin on a cool, refreshing glass of wine, and stood sipping it as he tried to take in all the sights and sounds.*

The square buzzed with purposeful energy. Everyone had somewhere to go, something to buy, something to sell, someone to talk to. There were young people as well as adults in the crowd: groups of girls huddled together, whispering and giggling, and boys chased each other, dodging through bodies and around stalls. Deven felt very out of place and insignificant. How was he ever to find his family here? And there was obviously no one in this crowd he could tell about the princess.

It was the wine vendor who gave him the idea of talking to the Captain of the Guard. He started making casual conversation with Deven, about the princess, of course, since that was all anyone was talking about, and he mentioned that a proclamation had been read that morning asking anyone with news about the princess to report it to the Captain of the Guard. So Deven casually asked where this person might be found, and the vendor directed him to the palace.

Deven took leave of the wine vendor and wove his way through the crowd, finally making it to the other side of the square, where a road led in the direction of the palace.

When the street opened out into the square before the palace, he had to stop again in amazement. The marketplace had assailed him with its masses of people; this square stunned him with its vastness of marble. Multi-colored marble squares began at his feet and stretched all the way across the immense space to the white marble walls surrounding the palace. On either side of the huge palace an even larger garden must have been enclosed, for trees draped their green branches over the walls which seemed to extend for miles in each direction. Directly in front of Deven a great, golden gate stood open, showing a long, tree-lined driveway leading up to the palace itself.

The sight was overwhelming, and Deven wondered what a poor, simple boy like himself was doing in such a magnificent place. But he had a responsibility to fulfil. He *took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and marched across the square to the golden gate of the palace.*

Two soldiers stopped him just inside the gates, and when he hesitantly said he'd like to speak with the Captain of the Guard, they silently escorted him down a long, tree-lined drive to a small, white building. They entered the building and one soldier knocked on a great wooden door.

"Citizen to see you, sir," he said loudly, and someone said, "Show him in."

Deven was ushered into a large room dominated by a huge wooden desk. Maps and swords hung on the walls, and windows overlooked what appeared to be a stableyard.

The interview that followed was the most humiliating experience Deven had ever experienced. He told his story at the invitation of the hard-faced man sitting across the desk from him, hesitating when he got to the more unbelievable parts, but forging ahead bravely and telling everything he remembered. When he finished, the man's eyes were narrow and icy and he almost hissed as he spoke.

"You are either a great fool, or a great liar, and either way you waste my time. Do you take me for a fool, that I would believe such a story? " He pulled a map from a drawer and flung it across to the boy. "Do you see a Swamp of Sinmole on this map?" Deven unrolled it and found himself staring at a duplicate of Morag's map, with one important difference: up in the top right corner where the Swamp of Sinmole should have been, this map said only, "Highlands." The Captain snatched the parchment back. "Go back where you came from, boy, and stop trying to meddle in affairs greater than your comprehension."

Deven couldn't speak. Disappointment welled up in him, choking his throat. It tasted bitter. It wasn't the Captain's accusations that hurt him; only the man's unwillingness to believe. All Deven could think about was the princess, lying in the tower. Now who would rescue her?

Before he could say anything, the Captain called for a soldier and Deven was quickly escorted back down the tree-lined drive to the golden palace gates. He was left standing alone and lost in the middle of the beautiful, imposing, marble square.

Kary winced as she wrote that scene, for she could feel acutely how Deven must feel. He was a better person than herself, however, for his thoughts were only for the princess, not for his own distress. *Hang in there, Deven,* she reassured him. *You'll show him.* It probably wouldn't come into the story, but just the thought that the Captain would receive his come-uppance eventually made Kary feel much better.

It took her a week to convince herself, but Kary finally decided to do something brave. It wasn't something Megan would approve of; if anything, it would make her more of a teacher's pet, but that's not what made it so frightening.

It all began with Miss Krawchuck's unit on Character. The class looked at novels and poems and plays and tried to figure out how the authors created their characters and made them life-like. Kary listened and read intently, hoping to learn how she could do it, too. The final assignment of the unit was what gave her the brave idea.

"I would like each of you to try your hand at creating a character. Choose two people you know, or invent two people, if you like, and write a character sketch for each, not only describing each person, but showing how each is similar to or different from the other. We've learned that authors often use comparison to help us understand their characters better. This is what I'm asking you to do."

Immediately a picture of Morag and Ridach popped into Kary's head. What if she used her description of the two witches as her character sketches? The thought terrified her. She would have no problem inventing any two characters and handing in character sketches about them, but these weren't just any two characters. They were part of her story, and their success or failure meant success or failure for the whole thing. If Miss

Krawchuck liked them . . . oh, if she would only like them! Then Kary would feel justified in writing; she would think it worthwhile to continue Deven's journey, to rescue the princess, to reveal his true identity--all that seemed so real inside her head would have a reason to emerge into life on paper.

But if Miss Krawchuck didn't like them. If she thought they were silly, or unbelievable . . . Then the world would all collapse around Kary's ears (*isn't there an expression like that? Why around the ears, I wonder? Why not the feet? Maybe it is the feet.*) It would all collapse around Kary's feet into a shallow, meaningless triviality. The risk was too great.

But Kary decided to take it. She copied out her descriptions of the two witches, adding a few more details and taking away anything to do with Deven's story, and handed the character sketch in. Then she waited anxiously for its return.

After wandering aimlessly through the streets of Pavalis for a while and spending another coin on a sausage roll to ease his hunger, Deven found a deserted pier sticking out into Lake Tamas-ah, where he could sit and rest and think. The sun was setting behind him, spreading gold across the lake, but he felt black and empty inside. What was he to do now?

Part of him wanted to give up and go back home, back to the clearing in the forest where he knew who he was and what he had to do when he got up in the morning. He could claim that it was impossible to find out his true parentage--although he hadn't even begun to try--and the woodcutter would take him back and they could live together as they always had.

"But what about the princess?" the other part of his mind kept responding. He was the only one who knew where she was. If he didn't do something to save her, she would never be found. He couldn't just walk away and leave her to her fate. But what could he do?

The moon was rising across the lake, sending a silver path of light across to where Deven was sitting. "Why don't you go look for her yourself?" asked the voice inside his head. "Don't be ridiculous," he thought. How was he supposed to get there? "Walk. It's not much farther than you've come already." Deven didn't like the direction his thoughts were taking. He was tired, and hungry, and his feet hurt. "I'll just find someplace to curl up for the night, and I'll think about it in the morning," he told himself.

A little later, curled up in a warehouse on top of some old fishing nets, he tried to empty his mind for sleep. But he couldn't stop thinking about the princess, in her tower in the middle of the Swamp of Sinmole. He dreamed that night that he was trying to force his way through ghostly grey trees, hung with moss, but they blocked his path and would not let him by.

"Kary," asked Miss Krawchuck, "can I talk with you for a minute?"

What could she want? Was it that bad?

"Kary, I wanted you to know how impressed I was with your character sketch. If I didn't already know your writing, I would have thought you'd taken it from a novel you'd read. You have a very strong narrative sense; I got the feeling there's a good story behind these two characters."

A warm, tingling feeling was rising from Kary's stomach and spreading all through her body. She couldn't believe what she was hearing, or how happy it made her. *She thought it came from a novel. Then it must sound like real writing. It must be good.*

Miss Krawchuck seemed to be waiting for a response. Kary looked up at the straight, spare, grey figure who was smiling at her. She realized suddenly, with surprize, that Morag was a lot like Miss Krawchuck. *Should I tell her about the story?* Her knees grew quivery at the very thought, and at once she knew she had to tell her.

"It does come from a story," she began shyly, looking down, only to look up again because she had to know what her teacher was thinking. Miss Krawchuck raised an eyebrow and waited for Kary to continue. "I'm writing a story, a fairy tale, sort of. It's not about Morag and Ridach, but they're in it, so you will get to find out what happens to them." Her sudden rush of words stopped. "That is, if you'd like to read it, when it's finished," she ended lamely.

"That's wonderful, Kary!" Miss Krawchuck exclaimed, looking genuinely pleased. "I'd love to read your story. I'm so happy to hear you're putting your talent to good use." She glanced at the clock. "But I can't keep you--you're going to be late for your next class. You'd better hurry."

Kary hurried down the hallway in a bewildered, happy daze. *She liked it. She liked it. She liked it.* It didn't matter that her next class was math, that Mrs. Richards made a sarcastic remark about her lateness, or even that she got the problem she was supposed to do on the board wrong. She was off in a new and delightful world:

" This is an excellent story, Kary. You really should consider getting it published."

" I am happy to accept your novel for publication. Enclosed is your first check."

" So, Miss Hill, to what to you attribute your enormous success as a fantasy writer?" " Well, I think it's because I believe in my stories as I write them. I don't think you can write really convincing fantasy if you're not convinced of it yourself." Say--that's pretty good. I should remember that.

"Kary, could I see you for a moment?"

Her bubble burst quickly as she went to stand before Mrs. Richards' desk.

"You've been extremely inattentive in Math class lately, and your work is suffering because of it. Do you have any explanation for this?"

What am I supposed to say? That I spend most math classes in a place called Caralisle? That I'm going to be a famous writer and math isn't going to matter any more?

"I didn't think so. I would like to see an improvement in your performance--that is, after all, my job. To that end I've made up a series of extra assignments for you to do on each unit. I would like you to hand them in before each unit test. They will count toward your grade."

But I already do so much math homework. It's the only homework I do.

"To ensure that you do the assignments, I've written a note to your parents informing them of what I expect from you and why. I'm asking them to sign each assignment before you hand it in."

Oh, terrific. If you only knew how much trouble this is going to get me in. On second thought, you probably do know. I can see where I got my inspiration for Ridach.

Mrs. Richards picked up a large brown envelope from her desk and handed it to Kary. "Here are the assignments. The letter to your parents is inside." She looked sternly at Kary, who looked down at the envelope. "I've spent a lot of time preparing these. I hope you take them seriously."

What am I supposed to say? Thank you?

"That's all. You may go."

Out in the hallway, Lynne was at her locker and noticed Kary coming out of Mrs. Richards' classroom. "She sure kept you in for a while. What did she want?"

Kary grimaced and held up the envelope. "I have to do extra assignments because I'm not paying attention in class."

"No way! That's hardly fair--no one pays attention in math class. Besides, I thought you did well in Math."

"Well, I'm not failing. And I do my homework--that's the worst of it."

"You know, she really seems to pick on you a lot. I wonder what her problem is."

Kary was touched by Lynne's show of concern. She hadn't thought anyone noticed what happened to her. "I think she's getting back at me for my brother. She taught him math, too, only he failed."

"She's always comparing you to him, isn't she. What's his name; Brian?"

"Yeah. He really hated her. I can see why."

"I heard he was going to be a musician or something. Is that true?"

Be cool. She's just asking. There's nothing to be ashamed about. "Yes. He joined a band about a year ago, as the keyboardist."

"That's really neat. What's it called?"

"I'm not sure--they kept changing the name. Anyway, they're in Vancouver now, I think." *At least, that's where he said they might go.*

"They must be doing pretty good, then."

Suddenly Kary's eyes filled with tears. "I don't know," she whispered, and choked up. "I don't know how they're doing. We haven't heard from him since he left."

"Oh, Kary, I'm sorry." Lynne put a tentative arm around Kary's shoulders, but Kary broke away and fled down the hall. *Why'd she have to ask, anyway? It's none of her business. It's none of anyone's business. It's not even my business! Brian doesn't exist any more. No one should know his name. Mrs. Richards should shut up about him, just shut up!*

But Mrs. Richards did not shut up about him. In fact, she mentioned him in her letter to Kary's parents, as Kary found out at the dinner table that night.

"Megan, you can go do your homework now. Your mother and I want to discuss something with Kary." Megan raised her eyebrows at Kary and sauntered out of the kitchen.

As soon as she was gone, Kary took a bold step and jumped into the conversation before it began. "Do you want to hear some good news before we discuss the bad news?"

Her father looked surprised, but merely said, "Go ahead."

"Miss Krawchuck, my L. A. teacher, called me up after class to tell me she was very impressed with my latest assignment. She said if she didn't already know my writing, she would have thought I'd gotten it out of a novel, it was that good."

Her mother smiled encouragingly, but her father seemed unimpressed. "Out of a novel? What kind of assignment was this?"

"We were supposed to write character sketches. We're studying character."

"Of all the ridiculous . . . What will they come up with next! Writing character sketches?"

"Dear, . . ." her mother interrupted.

"No, I'm serious. This is a perfect example of what's gone wrong with teaching English. They teach all this wishy-washy creative mumbo jumbo and then wonder why they're graduating illiterates!"

Bad move, Kary. Really bad move.

He turned to Kary. "It's also a perfect example of what Jane is saying in her letter. Kary can't concentrate on essentials. She's just like Brian was: she had no scholastic discipline."

Kary felt obliged to defend herself against more comparisons with Brian. "But Dad, my average is 85%. Even my math marks are almost all above 70."

"That's not the point. Junior High school is easy. Any kid with half a brain can sail through it without lifting a finger. But when you get to High School, and especially university, you'll find it won't be so easy. That's when the study habits you develop now will become essential to your success."

He was speaking earnestly now, and Kary knew he really believed what he was saying, and believed it was for Kary's good that he said it. But he was still being unfair.

"But I do all my math homework, Dad. I really try. Sure, it's not my favorite subject, but I don't think Mrs. Richards is being fair to accuse me of all that."

"She does do a lot of homework, dear," her mother put in. "More than most kids her age."

"True," her father conceded, "but she also does a lot of reading and a lot of daydreaming. That spells failure in the long run. Look how Brian turned out."

He's not a failure, Kary thought fiercely, although she knew she had no proof of that. She could tell by the look on her mother's face that she was thinking the same thing.

"At any rate," her father continued, "I think these extra assignments are a good idea. Jane thinks they'll raise your mark by a good 10% if you do them conscientiously. Will you do them, Kary?"

I don't have much choice, do I? "Yes."

"That's the spirit. You'll see. Math isn't so bad when you start to understand it."

I know, I know. Character sketches aren't so bad either, if you'd only understand that.

Her father left, and her mother gave her a motherly sqeeze. "You know we care about you, don't you? We just want you to be happy."

"I know, Mom. But,"

"But what, dear?"

"Why are you always picking on me? Megan doesn't do half as well in school as I do, and you never get on her case. It's not fair."

"Hmm. You see, dear, Megan's strengths lie in different areas than schoolwork. She's good at sports, for example. We can't expect her to do as well as you do in her studies. As long as she does well enough to get into university, we'll be satisfied that she's doing her best. You're different: you can really go places academically if you work hard. We expect more from you because we know you can do more. It may seem unfair now, but later on you'll understand."

What you're telling me is that I'm a nerd. That's supposed to make me happy?

"Okay, honey?"

"Yes, Mom." Walking up to her room she thought longingly of Deven and his imminent journey acrosss Lake Tamas-ah. But she didn't have time to write. She had math homework to do.

"You bring it on yourself, you know," Megan commented as Kary walked by her room.

Kary glared at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You made the same mistake Brian made. If he hadn't done so well in school before, they wouldn't have minded so much when he started failing because of his music. You can't ever let yourself become really good at anything, because then you're stuck, labled for life. You're Kary the Smart One now, and you always will be, unless you start easing up on the brains. I'm just Megan the Average Student, and life's a lot easier for me."

Kary just stared at her older sister, her mind so full of anger and confusion she couldn't think of anything to say.

"I'm just telling you this for your own good," Megan added, and Kary decided that anger was the appropriate response.

"Since when have you ever done anything for my own good?" she demanded, and pounced off to her room.

"That's hardly fair," protested Megan, but Kary slammed her door.

No one really cares about my own good, she thought fiercely. *They're all just saying that to make me do what they want.* She thought about walking through the ravine, which her mother still hadn't found out about, and about the story written in the notebook labled "Mathematics." *If they only knew.* She opened the deceptive notebook, riffled through its bumpy, messy pages, then sighed as she put it aside for the neat, smooth-paged notebook that really did contain her math homework.

Chapter 10 -- The Lake

Health, otherwise known as Goof-off Period, was held every second Friday during first block. Here the attentive grade 7's were taught How to Recognize when their Friends wanted to commit Suicide, How to have Fun without getting Drunk or Stoned, How to Get Along with their Parents, and other such fascinating subjects. Everyone looked forward to Grade 8 Health, when they would learn all about birth control, AIDs, teenage pregnancy, etcetera. Kary didn't particularly care to learn any of it, since it seemed so irrelevant to real life. When was she going to have to worry about birth control? Not in the next hundred years, anyway. And as for drugs, she had no idea how to get a hold of any, even if she wanted to try some. Other kids were 'in' on that sort of scene; she wasn't 'in' on anything.

The getting-along-with-parents discussion she found particularly amusing. She could just picture her parents' reaction if she came home one day and said, "Mom, Dad, I'd really like to get to know you better. Can we sit down and discuss some common interests?" Louise seemed to find it ridiculous, too.

"I don't know about most people's parents, but mine don't believe in talking to their children."

"Kids are to be talked at, not to," Kary replied, understanding completely. She wanted to continue the conversation, but Louise quickly changed the subject, so they talked about homework for the rest of the walk to Science class. *I wonder why she never wants to talk about anything,* Kary thought briefly, but class started and she dismissed the concern.

One of the more interesting Health classes was on career planning. Not that career planning was in itself fun, but the questionnaires and charts they got to fill out to determine what they should be when they grew up provided much amusement.

"Hey, this thing says I should be a lumberjack!" announced Roger, to general laughter.

"Well, mine says I can be a museum curator," Sonya put in.

"What the heck's that?" someone asked.

"I have no idea," Sonya replied with a giggle.

"What are your possibilities?" Louise asked Kary, when it became apparant the teacher wasn't stopping conversation.

"Well, I could be a fashion designer or an army chaplain."

"Army chaplain--that's a good one! Mine says fisheries director or forest ranger."

"At least there's sort of a connection between those two. You must have put high priority on outdoor activities."

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"So, do you know what you really want to do with your life?"

"I'm going to be a doctor," Louise replied with a sigh. It wasn't the kind of answer Kary had expected.

"You don't sound like you want to be a doctor."

"I don't really have a choice," Louise replied, and seemed to want to stop discussing it. But Kary wasn't going to let her get away so easily this time.

"What do you mean, you don't have a choice? Everyone has a choice."

"Sure, I could choose to run away from home," she said, a little bitterly. Kary winced. "Oh, I'm sorry," Louise quickly said. "I wasn't even thinking of your brother. But, well, you should understand what it's like. Your parents are probably a lot like mine."

Kary hadn't meant for the conversation to turn back to herself; she hadn't even known Louise knew about Brian. "My parents," she hesitated, trying to describe them, "they have certain ideas about what their kids should do. Brian wasn't willing to fit those ideas."

"What about you?" Louise asked, surprizing Kary again.

"I guess I don't know what my ideas are yet," she replied thoughtfully. She had never stopped to consider her own situation in quite that light. It was a little frightening. *Whatever my ideas turn out to be, I bet they're not going to like them*.

"All I know is, I don't want to be a doctor, but I'm going to be one anyway. It's all I've heard from the day I entered school."

"Why are your parents so dead set on a doctor?"

"They decided that their first-born child should be the first Lim with an M.D. That's me." She spoke with resignation, but her eyes betrayed the hopeless anger burning deep inside her.

Kary was amazed. She hadn't realized there could be such complicated depths to the shy, quiet girl who did nothing but study. *And I complain because Mom won't let me walk through the ravine.* That thought led her to another. "Can't you just wait until you're 18 and then do whatever you want? They can't force you to do things for your whole life, can they?"

Louise shook her head. "I couldn't live my whole life knowing I had disappointed my parents' greatest hope. Could you?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I could live my whole life with my own greatest hopes disappointed."

The bell rang, and it was time to go to Science again. The two girls walked down the hall in contemplative silence. Kary was thinking of Brian. *I wonder if he feels guilty. Probably not. He didn't like Dad very much; he's probably glad Dad's disappointed in him. Can you disagree with someone completely and still love them?*

"Can you really love someone if you make them unhappy?" Louise asked, just before they reached their next class.

"I was just wondering almost the same thing," Kary laughed. She felt closer to Louise than she'd been to anyone since Brian left.

Deven awoke, stiff, cold and hungry, in the misty greyness just before dawn. As he remembered all his thoughts and concerns of the previous night, he realized that he'd already made his decision: he must find the Swamp of Sinmole. Walking briskly back to the marketplace, Deven felt easy in his mind and full of purpose and energy now that he knew what he needed to do.

A few warm buns filled his stomach, and another hunk of cheese and loaf of bread replenished his travelling supplies; the sun was just thinking about coming up when he returned to the shores of Lake Tamas-ah to see if he could find passage to the other side. Inwardly, Deven was amazed at how confident and sure of himself he felt. He was about to go in search of a place that didn't exist, to find a princess kidnapped by a witch, who, he was sure, could turn Deven into a puff of smoke just by thinking about him, and yet he felt more brave and carefree than he had when he first left the clearing in the forest thinking all he had to do was get to Pavalis and find someone who recognized his ring. He pulled the ring out of his shirt and turned it over in his fingers.

"If ever I needed luck, now is the time to give it to me," he whispered, remembering Morag's words. Then he shrugged, returned the ring to its place, and strode off towards the piers where innumerable fishermen were just putting out for their daily catch.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you know of anyone who could take me to the other side of the lake?"

The gruff old fisherman looked at him for a moment. "I'm going to the north end of the lake, if that's where you're headed."

"Yes, that's where I'm going."

"Well, if you'll give me a hand with these nets, you can come along."

"Thank you, sir."

"My name's not 'sir,' it's Mag."

So Deven sailed across Lake Tamas-ah with Mag the fisherman, leaving Pavalis and all he had hoped to find there behind. He entertained the gruff but gentle man with tunes on his flute, and was reminded of the carefree days in the forest with the woodcutter. But those days were far behind him now. The sun was high in the sky by the time low hills appeared in the distance across the water. They shimmered brown and green in the heat, looking like a mirage.

"That'll be the north shore," Mag said, in his usual short way. "We'll get there in about an hour."

True to his word, an hour later they entered a small bay surrounded by the brownish green hills, and Deven was put ashore.

"Thank you," said Deven.

"Good luck," replied Mag.

Then Deven turned his back to the Lake and set off due north across the high rolling countryside, walking briskly to try and get his clothes dry. He had no idea how far he had to go. He knew there was another, smaller lake between Lake Tamas-ah and the Swamp, according to Morag's map, but once he'd got across or around that he wasn't sure how much further on the Swamp would be. It didn't really matter. He would just keep going until he found it or ran out of food, whichever came first. It was what he had to do, and, secure in that feeling, he walked with a light heart and eyes open to the desolate beauty of the countryside.

He reached the second lake just before sundown, much to his surprize and relief. According to the map in his head he had covered almost half the distance he was expecting to have to travel, in just one day. The second half of the journey would likely last much longer, but at least he was off to a good start.

The lake was dark and still in the slanting evening light. It gave back a perfect reflection of the rocks and low hills that surrounded it, so that it was hard to tell which was real land and which was the mirror image. Deven sat on a rock at the lakeshore to eat his *dinner. He gradually relaxed from the day's exertions, letting the stillness of the scene before him flow into his weary mind.*

Suddenly, the lake seemed to catch on fire before his eyes. The setting sun caught the water at such an angle that it turned bright reddish-orange, and a low breeze sprang up to ruffle the firey water into tiny, quivering flames. Deven caught his breath at the wonderful sight. All at once he felt very small and alone in a wide, mysterious world. A beautiful world, yes, but also unknown and potentially dangerous. His decision to come on this quest now seemed very foolhardy. He did not regret it--it would have been worth it just to see this sight--but he felt a shiver of trepidation at the thought of what he still might have to face before it was over.

As these thoughts filled his mind, Deven noticed something moving out in the middle of the water. He tensed with fear, although he tried to tell himself it was just a beaver or a muskrat. It came closer, a small shape gliding through the fading fire on the water. Deven remained motionless. The closer it got the more he became convinced it looked like a horse swimming low, with only its head above water. But what would a horse be doing swimming across a lonely lake at night? The sun had set completely and the air was shimmering with the deceptive half-light of twilight by the time the animal was close enough to confirm that, yes, it was a horse, or at least a horse's head, and it was coming straight towards Deven.

He never knew, afterwards, why he didn't turn and run away at that point, but at the time he could see no reason to. When it was no more than 10 feet from shore, the swimmer began to raise its head out of the water on a long, white neck--far longer than any horse's neck Deven had ever seen. Then he began to feel very afraid, but it was too late to escape. The creature stretched its horse's head toward Deven and stared at him out of its mild blue eyes. He felt unmistakably that he was being summoned by this strange, yet beautiful beast.

"You want me to come with you?" he stammered.

The creature nodded its graceful head twice.

"But, how?"

The head curved around on the neck and seemed to indicate a back lying underwater.

"You want me to ride on you?"

Again the creature dipped its head in a nod. Deven sat for a long moment, staring at the white apparition waiting for him in the water. He could hear the waves gently lapping at the shore, could feel a breath of wind stir his hair, could smell the cold, clean smell of night on the open moor. All of these things were reassuringly real and familiar, but the unbelievable horse creature still remained poised gracefully before him. At last he turned and packed up the rest of his food, swung his package across his shoulders, and slid down from the rock into the water.

It was cold, but shallow. When he reached the horse creature he could see its body stretching out beneath the water in long, sinuous white curves. It had come as close to shore as the shallow water would allow. Deven didn't let himself think about what he was doing as he reached for the creature's neck and swung his leg over its body. It felt just like a horse, warm and soft. As Deven climbed on, it humped its back to create a seat for him just out of the water. As soon as he was settled, the creature pushed itself off of the lakeshore and turned to swim across the lake. The moon rose just then, in all its silver glory, and the creature turned its head toward the brilliant orb as if in greeting or worship. Then it began gliding across the water so smoothly that Deven hardly felt they were moving at all.

A dream time later he found himself sliding off the creature's back onto another rocky shore. Stumbling away from the lake, he turned just in time to see the fairy horse vanish underwater. A few steps further on his feet found a moss-filled hollow in the ground, and he curled up in it and fell asleep without another thought.

"How's the math homework going, Kary?" her mother stopped by to ask. Kary jumped guiltily.

"It's done already." It was, too. Her story was a remarkable incentive to get her other work done.

"You're sure working hard these days, dear. You need to take a break now and then."

"I will, don't worry," Kary responded. She felt guilty, spending all this time writing when her mother thought she was doing homework. But it wasn't her fault her mother thought that. *You have every right to write, Kary*, she told herself firmly. So why did she still feel badly?

Kary was pleased with Deven's journey across the lake. She had wondered how to get him to the Swamp that no one else could get to, and of course something magic would have to take him. Until she began writing the scene, she had no idea what sort of magic to use, but the horse just appeared out of the sunset at the right moment, and the scene just about wrote itself. Those were the best kind of scenes, she decided. She knew they were right, because they came right from the source of the story, and they always came just when they were needed.

There are some days when I really think I could be a writer, she thought to herself as she walked home from school the next day.

It was snowing; it had been all day. The world was a bowl full of soft whiteness; shapes and colors all blended together in a white silence that enveloped every motion, every sound. Walking home from school was like walking through a dream world. Kary loved it. She could almost believe in magic again--a different kind of magic, winter magic. Boundaries were merged: Narnia could be just around the corner; she might open the door of her house and find Brian sitting at the table, as if he had never left. Standing at the edge of the ravine she could imagine she heard the woodcutter chopping away just below. And she wanted to go back to the center, the place where all the worlds she knew came together and were at peace.

Her feet squeaked softly on the hard packed snow of the path as she walked down into the ravine, but the snow was falling so thickly that soon she was walking on a fresh, soft white carpet. She could hardly see her own footsteps behind her, the snow fell so fast.

If the snow keeps falling like this, I could go up my secret path and my tracks would be obliterated moments later, she thought, pleased with the discovery. The magic seemed to be working for her. It wanted her to find it, find its source. She knew where it would be. The center of this white magical world was her clearing, and Kary would find the source of the magic there, amid the ever silent trees.

Pausing at the beginning of the secret path, Kary felt like some fantasy heroine about to achieve her quest. What would she find in the clearing? Herself, of course. That was what they were all searching for, really. Hadn't the wizard Ged defeated the beast by naming it with his own name? And Meg, to rescue Charles Wallace from It, had to discover her own gift, the one thing she had that It didn't. Kary thought suddenly of Louise, and with a tremor of fear wondered if she really ought to find her true self. Perhaps it would be better not to know, to follow Megan's path of average fitting in.

No, she thought, still in her role as heroine. *Whatever it costs me, I must know who I am* . And she set her foot on the path to her destiny.

Something crunched, and it wasn't Kary. She whirled around. No one was in sight, but as she listened she could hear muffled footsteps approaching from down the path. *Not again! It's going to be awfully hard to hide this time. What on earth is this person doing in the ravine on a day like this?* She decided to pretend she was walking the opposite way, and hope the person didn't know her. As she began walking, the other footsteps slowed and stopped. Kary froze. *Now what are they doing? Piddling their dog?* But she hadn't heard any dog-like noises. *What if it's Trevor?* she suddenly thought.

What if he knows I'm here, and he's waiting to see what I'm going to do? What if Sonya's right, and he's following me?

Annoyed at the interruption of her magic quest--it was gone now, the magic, and wouldn't be back that day--angry at the thought of her privacy being invaded, embarrassed at the memory of Sonya's insinuations, Kary marched around the corner of the path, right into Trevor, who was half-crouched behind a snow-covered spruce tree.

"Trevor! Are you following me?" she demanded, even angrier now that it seemed her suspicion (and Sonya's) was true.

"Kary!" He stood up at once, flushing red. "No, no I wasn't. I . . . I was . . ."

"I can't believe you'd do such a thing," she interrupted his attempts to explain himself. Finding herself with nothing more to say, she threw him what she hoped was a suitably withering glance and stomped off down the path.

"Kary, wait. You don't understand," he called after her, but she disdained to turn around.

Disdain is a difficult emotion to maintain for very long, however, and before she got home she was feeling mostly frustration and regret.

Why'd he have to go and ruin it all? she moaned. *I've made such a fool of myself; that was so stupid. If he really was following me, now he knows that I know he was, and that will make everything awkward from now on. And if he wasn't--though who knows what he was doing instead--he now knows I thought he was following me, and that's even more embarrassing.*

At the heart of the embarrassment, although she did not articulate this to herself, was the awful feeling of having been caught believing in magic. Even though Trevor could have had no idea what she was thinking, his mere presence was an invasion of her secret, and she felt betrayed. Deeper than that, even, was the crushing sadness of having to admit there really was no magic, only snow and trees. She sighed, thinking of Deven, then thinking of Brian and feeling utterly depressed.

The next day she saw Trevor going into the school ahead of her, and she was stricken with a pang of guilt. Her anger had mostly faded overnight, and watching the slight figure with his usual raggedy jeans opening the big puce door she decided that she had been too quick to accuse him. "You don't understand," he had called after her, and she remembered now that he had sounded hurt.

Terrific. Someone else who hates me now. I wish I could apologize, explain somehow. Trevor hating her bothered her a lot more than Sonya hating her, or the girls with the hair saying she was a snob.

She moped into class, hating herself, wishing, not for the first time, that she could start the whole year over again. Lynne gave her a shy smile which faded into a worried look when she saw Kary's expression. She had seemed reluctant to talk to Kary ever since the crying episode, and Kary wasn't one to initiate a conversation. *She thinks I'm a basket case, or she thinks I hate her, or she feels sorry for me. Either way, she'll be just as glad if I don't try to talk to her.* At least Louise was still the same. She looked up from her book, nodded absently at Kary, and returned to the absorbing pages. *Taran Wanderer*, Kary noticed. *I'll have to ask her if it's any good.*

Math class was hardly exciting enough to take her mind out of its slump, especially since after having done the extra assignments for this unit Kary actually understood what was going on, and found the class exercises extremely boring.

"Before you go today," Mrs. Richards stopped them when the bell rang, "I want to remind you that Parent Teacher Night is a week from today. I would like to have a sample of your work to show each of your parents, so I'm asking you to hand in your Math notebooks next Monday."

Right, Kary thought, and promptly filed the information in an unused corner of her brain as she piled out of the classroom with everyone else. She looked for Trevor in the hallways all during that day, but didn't see him, much to her relief, or disappointment, depending on how she was feeling at the moment.

She lingered at her locker when her last class was done, thinking she might catch him on the way out, but when she got out into the school field there was no one in sight.

Oh well, she thought, her courage waning yet again. *I'm sure he could care less about me. I don't need to apologize to him.* Just then a door ahead of her in the school opened and a figure in tattered jeans and a rusty sweatshirt emerged and began walking across the field. Kary's heart stopped. Now what? Watching him advance across the field she felt her heart get heavier and heavier, until some strange force inside her started her legs running and made her voice cry out, "Trevor! Wait!"

He turned around and waited as she ran up to him. Breathless and red with embarrassment, she blurted out,

"I'm sorry. Yesterday. I was so stupid. And mean." She rushed on without waiting for his reply. "It's just that I'm not allowed to go into the ravine, and I was afraid if anyone saw me, they'd tell my Mom, and when I saw it was you I . . ." She couldn't tell him about what Sonya had said. "I don't know. I just reacted with the first thing I could think of." *Oh geez, how stupid.* But Trevor was smiling.

"That's all right," he said. "I'm not allowed to go into the ravine either. That's why I was hiding. I didn't want anyone to see me."

Kary stared at him, unbelieving. He didn't think she was a stupid dweeb? He understood? Suddenly they both broke out laughing at the utter ridiculousness of their situation.

"So we were hiding from each other, because we were both afraid of being caught?" Kary burst out between giggles. "That's so absurd!"

"We're partners in crime, and we didn't even know it," Trevor responded with equal amusement.

"So, partner, shall we return to the scene of the crime?" Kary joked, feeling reckless with relief. She almost felt like showing him the clearing, so great was her enjoyment of their new-found complicity. But Trevor unwittingly saved her from that indiscretion.

"Naw, I can't today. I can't get home late two days in a row, or mum gets upset."

"I understand," said Kary. "I told my Mom I stay after school in the library some days to study, but she wouldn't believe me if I was late every day."

So they walked home together over the bridge, sharing complaints about overprotective parents, laughing over the amusing ways they had to get around their restrictions.

"So did your Mom fall for the best costume story?"

"Oh yeah. I told her everyone admired it, and all the teachers said they'd never seen anything like it in all their years, etc., etc. She ate it up."

Neither questioned the other about why they wanted to walk through the ravine; it was enough that they shared the desire and the difficulty.

"I wonder why they have such a problem with the ravine," Trevor asked as they walked over the bridge, pausing to look down at the beautiful white scene below. "It's not like we live in New York, and this is Central Park."

"I know. My Mom seems convinced it's full of rapists and murderers, and she won't believe otherwise. I guess maybe they're just afraid of what they don't know. If they'd only walk through it themselves, they'd see how safe it is."

"I can just see trying to convince my mother to walk into the ravine!"

It was true. Mrs. Dohler didn't belong there. They both laughed at the incongruity of it and gave up trying to understand their parents.

By the time they came to the street where their ways parted, Kary felt like she had known Trevor all her life. She didn't have to feel awkward around him; whatever she said he would understand. It was a wonderfully free feeling, and she savored it.

"Same time tomorrow?" Trevor asked as they said goodbye.

"Yes, comrade," Kary replied, pleased that he, too, wanted to do this again. "See you then."

Megan had just gotten home when Kary walked in the door, and it seemed she had seen them talking at the end of the street. "Who was that, your boyfriend?" she asked, rather tauntingly.

What has gotten into her lately, Kary wondered, feeling too good about herself to respond in kind. "No," she said simply, "just Trevor Dohler, the guy whose Mom drove me to the dance."

Megan seemed upset that she hadn't started an argument, and huffed upstairs. Kary didn't care. She had just realized that her memory of the dance was redeemed from an embarrassing failure to a humorous moment, just by sharing it with Trevor. *Wow. It's amazing what a difference just talking to someone makes. I should try it more often.* She was tempted to go up to Megan and tell her that her advice at the beginning of the year was right, but she didn't think her sister was in a mood to appreciate it.

"Hi, Mom," she called. "How was your day?"

A slightly startled mother appeared from the laundry room. "Hi, Kary. Just fine, thanks. How was school?"

"Oh, same as always. Math is pretty boring now that I know what's going on."

"So all those extra assignments are helping?" Her mother seemed really pleased.

"Oh yeah, too much, almost! Can I take any clothes up with me?" she asked, noticing her mother's occupation.

"Yes, thank you." She sounded so surprised Kary was almost repentant. *Am I that unhelpful most of the time?* "Here. These are Megan's and these are yours. Thanks, Kary."

"Okay, Mom." She cheerfully gave Megan her clothes, took her own into her room and actually put them away. Then she sat down at her desk, feeling for once like she deserved to write. *Time to face the Swamp of Sinmole, Deven. Here's where we both get to prove ourselves.*

Chapter 11 -- The Swamp

Kary was having problems with the Swamp of Sinmole. She had been working on it all week and getting nowhere; each day she tore up the last day's work in frustration. The biggest problem was that Deven wasn't having enough problems with it. She could set the scene wonderfully: oozing mud, thorn bushes, creepy gnarled trees draped with moss, eerie mists swirling about, foul stenches, mysterious glooping noises just off to the left . . . But after a few paragraphs there wasn't anything else she could add.

He can't just squelch through mud for the whole of my grand, exciting, climactic scene. But she didn't feel competent to describe a monster-battling scene--after all, with no sword or weapon of any kind how was he going to defeat it? And she didn't know anything about swordplay, anyway. Maybe the ring would turn out to have marvelous powers. But then she'd have to come up with a monster, and besides, there had to be some point to fighting it.

"Aarrggh!" she muttered under her breath, so no one would hear. She wished she could talk to someone about it, get advice from someone, but who? She and Trevor had walked home together every day that week, and talked about just about everything--teachers, kids at school, parents, adults in general, kids in general, growing up, life in general--but she still hadn't mentioned her writing. It would sound so pretentious--"I'm writing a story, want to see it?"--and she didn't want him to think she was trying to be something special. Enough people thought that about her. Louise was so hard to approach about anything personal that she was out of the question, even though she would be the most likely to understand, and to have good ideas.

The phone rang. Megan was home this Saturday, for once, so Kary let her get it. It would be for her anyway.

"Kary, phone," called Megan.

Surprised, Kary ran out to the hall phone. "Hello?"

"Hi, Kary? This is Louise."

"Hi, Louise, how's it going?"

"Not bad. Listen, have you started working on your Social assignment yet?"

"Not really, I've just looked at it. Is it going to be hard?"

"Well, not hard, but it's going to take forever. I thought it would go a lot faster if we worked on it together."

"That's a good idea. When did you want to do it?"

"Are you free this afternoon?"

"Sure. You could come over here if you like. There's just my sister at home, and she'll probably be going shopping soon, so we'll have the house to ourselves."

"That would be great. You live on the other side of the ravine from the school, don't you."

"Yeah, on 40th ave. Why don't I meet you halfway or something."

"Good idea. Where's a good place?"

"Do you know were the bridge across the ravine is?"

"Yup."

"Why don't we meet there?"

"Okay. In an hour?"

"Great. See you then."

"Bye."

Kary returned to her room with an odd feeling in her head. *I'm just thinking about Louise, and she calls. Is there some sort of Fate operating here?* She shook her head to dislodge the idea. *Naaah.*

But it did seem like a fateful day. It had snowed again the night before, making everything fresh and sparkling under the clear blue sky. Louise admired the view of the ravine from the bridge, all "pristine and sylvan," as she called it.

"It's beautiful to walk through, too," Kary replied as they walked down the alley to her house. "On your way home I should take you through it. I'm not allowed to, but mom's out for the day, so she'll never know."

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to do anything that might get you in trouble," Louise said, concerned. "Besides, why aren't you allowed to? Is it dangerous?"

"My Mom thinks it's full of escaped convicts, but I walk home through it every day, and I've only ever seen old ladies walking their poodles. I think it's perfectly safe."

Louise was unconvinced. But fate decreed that they finish their assignment in record time, leaving a whole, beautiful winter afternoon at their disposal, and what better way to spend it than exploring the pristine, sylvan woods?

"Come on, Louise, I know you want to."

"I do. But I don't want you to do what your mother has forbidden."

"I already told you, I walk through it every day. Besides, that's between me and my Mom."

Louise still hesitated.

"Let it be recorded on the books that Louise has voiced her disapproval of this afternoon's undertaking and that I, Kary, assume full responsibility for my decision to continue with it," Kary announced in a suitably official-sounding voice. Louise broke into laughter and gave in.

"All right, all right! But this better be worth it!"

Fate also arranged it that no old ladies were walking their poodles that afternoon, and Kary and Louise had the whole, beautiful white forest to themselves.

"I feel like Anne of Green Gables and Diana, walking through the White Way of Delight," Louise said, thrilling Kary with the allusion.

"Oh, I'm so glad you like it," she said. "You'll have to be Diana, since you have the gorgeous raven hair. Mine isn't awful red, but it's awful mousy brown, so I guess I can be Anne."

Later, Kary was sure it was blind Fate and not conscious decision that led their steps closer and closer to her secret path. When at last they were right in front of it, the moment was right, and Kary turned to Louise with a half-fearful, half-eager expression.

"Diana, if I show you my most secret of all secrets, my nearest and most dear treasure in all this magical forest, will you swear to keep it secret until the end of your life?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye," Louise responded, half-laughing, but recognizing Kary's solemnity.

"Well, right here, though you can hardly tell, is the beginning of a secret path that leads to a magical place in the middle of the woods." Her poetic manner dropped as she realized, "but we can't go up because our footprints would show the way to every Tom, Dick and homicidal maniac who passes by."

Louise laughed out loud then. "But wait," she said, and, turning to a nearby tree, she broke off a low branch. "If we sweep the ground behind us, our footprints will disappear." She demonstrated on the path they were standing on, and it worked.

"Oh, wonderful!" exclaimed Kary. "Here I've been longing to return to my favorite place in the world, and I never thought of that. Let's go, then."

Somehow, rather than desecrating her sacred space, the addition of Louise/Diana, faithfully sweeping away their footprints up the path and responding with delight and admiration when they finally made it to the clearing, made it even more magical. The sun made the untouched snow glitter as though it had been strewn with diamonds; the fresh, chill air carried the smell of pine trees and mountain tops.

"The Diamond Palace," Louise breathed with delight. "Oh, I'm so glad you showed me this. It's wonderful!"

"No one else has ever seen it except we two."

"And it will stay our secret forever," Louise assured her. "Not that it isn't still all yours," she hastily added. "This is your place. That makes it even more special that you invited me here."

She understands! She understands, Kary's heart sang. Out loud she said, "You can't be Diana, you know: you have too much imagination. I didn't know you were so poetical."

Louise blushed a little. "Oh, I'm not. Mostly I'm very practical and boring. But you're very inspiring to be with. I didn't know that before, either."

I'm inspiring? Struck with a sudden idea, Kary had to share it with Louise. "You know, this may sound kind of funny, but making new friends is a bit like exploring a new country. You keep discovering new things you never knew were there."

They explored a lot of new country that afternoon. Being careful not to disturb the white expanse of snow, they made two thrones in a snowdrift under a stand of birch trees, and sat there and talked until their bums got cold. Then they promised eternal friendship à la Lucy Maud Montgomery, promised to come back to the Diamond Palace ere long, and went their separate ways.

I know, thought Kary, returning to her room to change her wet pants and once again returning to the problems of her story. *Ridach needs to be involved somehow. Perhaps she sends the monster to get Deven, but he can defeat it because of the ring. Or maybe . . .*

Mind once again full of possibilities instead of problems, she returned to the Swamp of Sinmole.

After three more days of walking over the springy turf of the highlands, and just when he was beginning to think that the Captain was right, and there could be no swamp anywhere around here, Deven noticed a change in the ground. He had been gradually going downhill all day, and now he noticed the moss- and heather-covered earth was beginning to feel rather wet and spongey. It wasn't long before his feet were quite soaked through, but as all the ground was equally wet he had no choice but to endure the discomfort. The water gathered together in trickles and small streams, and he followed *their general direction, always going further downhill. The air began to change. No more fresh breezes ruffled his hair, and in place of the fresh, green smell of the highlands came a thick, brown, rotting smell that got more powerful the further Deven went. Then the moss and heather gave way to reeds and grasses growing in what was now a few inches of water. When he felt his feet begin to squelch in mud, Deven knew he had entered the Swamp of Sinmole.*

The water became deeper and muddier. Soon Deven had to make his way by hopping from one grassy hump to another. Occasionally a wide, brown pool opened up in front of him, and he had to find a way around it. The reeds became taller, so that they blocked his view ahead, and he began encountering stubby thorn bushes in places he least expected them. Cold, wet, full of the stench of mud, and now scratched and bleeding from the ubiquitous thorns, Deven stopped on a hump of grass to eat his supper and wonder what on earth he was doing trudging through this vile swamp.

He spent the night in a tree: a low, gnarled, crooked tree, covered in slimy moss, that was hardly less wet than the ground and certainly less comfortable. The next day he encountered more and more of these ghostly looking trees; they slapped him with their dangling moss, picked at his clothes with their crooked branches, and tripped him with their humped roots. As if to increase his misery, a foul-smelling mist began writhing up from the ground, and at some points he couldn't see his hand in front of him, it was so thick. With no possibility of noticing landmarks, even if there were any, the only thing that convinced him he wasn't going around in circles was the fact that everything kept getting worse, especially the smell. Whatever he was going to find at the center of this swamp, he was sure it must be very large and long dead to be rotting with such vehemence.

"I give up," he said, about twenty times every hour, but he kept on trudging through the mud and mist.

It was a little after noon, as far as he could tell without being able to see the sun, when he began to think he was being followed. The evidence was hardly substantial--a *shadow in the mist at the corner of his eye, an echo of his squelching feet somewhere off to the left--but he felt a prickling at the back of his neck and a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he began to walk more slowly, looking behind him at every step.*

"Yes, yes--now what?"

Nestor couldn't help her: he didn't think the monster should be a bear, but he didn't know what it should be.

As she fell asleep that night, Kary concentrated on thinking of horror movies, hoping to have useful nightmares, but if she dreamed up any monsters she couldn't remember them the next morning.

"Do you all have your math notebooks to hand in today?" Mrs. Richards asked at the beginning of class. "I'll come by and collect them while you're working on this handout."

Oh darn, darn, shoot, rats, aarrggh! I knew I'd forget it. Now she's going to make some comment again.

"Kary?" The teacher stopped over her desk.

"I forgot mine at home this morning--can I possibly bring it tomorrow?"

A disapproving look formed itself over Mrs. Richards' features. "We don't have math class tomorrow. That's why I wanted them today." Her voice was unnecessarily loud, and Kary could feel her classmates watching.

"I'll bring it by your classroom first thing in the morning," Kary said softly, to make up for the teacher's volume.

"Fine. See that you do so."

She moved down the row, and Kary pretended to be concentrating on her work. A few minutes later, a small piece of paper landed on her desk. *A note? For me? No one sends me notes.* Opening it surreptitiously, Kary read, "What a witch! I forgot mine, too, but she didn't say anything mean to me. We can hand ours in together tomorrow. Lynne"

Kary looked over to where Lynne was sitting, but saw only a studious head bowed over her assignment. Kary smiled to herself. The world was full of surprises, some of them even pleasant.

When the attack came, it was like nothing Deven had imagined. A huge, black, snarling shape dropped down out of a tree as he passed under it, pushed him to the ground and tried to fasten its teeth on his neck. Deven tossed and rolled, kicking at the creature with his feet and trying to push it off with his hands, but it was much too heavy, and as it was pushing him deeper into the mud he found it harder and harder to struggle against it. Still turning his head from side to side, so it couldn't get a grip on his neck, Deven reached out his arms on either side, feeling for a weapon. The creature hissed and swiped and him with its huge claws, tearing open his shirt.

And suddenly the weight was gone from his chest, and a small shape looking remarkably like a cat bounded away into the mist, yowling.

Deven lay in the mud, breathing heavily. He looked down at his chest, where long welts were throbbing with pain, and noticed his ring lying exposed on his skin. Wiping one muddy hand on his muddy pants, he picked up the small gold ring and looked at it closely. The pattern of leaves all around it seemed to be glowing brighter than the rest of the ring; in fact, considering how dirty and bloody Deven was, the whole ring was remarkably clean and shiny.

"Well," Deven said to himself, and, since he couldn't think of anything else to say, he said it again. "Well, well."

He dragged himself out of the mud, found his pack which had been thrown to one side, and, as there was no clean water anywhere to wash with, he rinsed the worst of the mud off in a tepid pool and continued trudging on.

"You know," Kary told Candace, "I'm really starting to like Deven. He's awfully brave in a simple kind of way. He just takes things as they come, and keeps heading towards his goal, even though he has no idea whether he'll ever make it. He will, of course. I'll see to that."

Thirst became Deven's worst enemy as he plowed on through the foul mud. He wouldn't drink any of the swamp waters, for fear they would poison him. So he licked the condensed mist off his lip to moisten his tongue, and tried to swallow his stale bread so he wouldn't starve. Eventually he began to feel light-headed. Shapes appeared ahead of him in the mist that changed and disappeared as he got closer. Sometimes he felt as though he had left his body and was floating along just above the ground. Then when he returned to physical sensation, he was so tired he could scarcely lift his feet. Thus, when he saw the shining white tower rising ahead of him, he was sure it was just another apparition. And when he began walking on green grass dotted with flowers and heard the tinkle of a stream nearby, he knew he had finally lost consciousness entirely and was walking in a dream.

Finding the stream clear and clean, bubbling merrily over rocks, Deven decided it was fine to drink in a dream, so he plunged his face and hands into the beautiful cold liquid and drank to his heart's content. Then he stepped into the stream and washed all the mud and dried blood off himself, wincing as the cold water hit his fresh wounds. Lying on the stream bank beneath a warm sun--more hallucinations--he decided that if he was going to die this was certainly a nice way to go. A pleasant lassitude spread through his veins and he sank deeper and deeper into what he knew would be his last sleep.

Kary had to decide between a number of possibilities for the Deven-tower scene, and her mind was full of them as she got ready for school the next morning. *Should he fall asleep, and then be wakened by the princess? That would be a nice reversal of the Sleeping*

Beauty theme. But how does the princess get out of the tower to find him? Maybe he could be wakened by Ridach, as she's about to drag him into the tower. Lots of possibility for action and suspense there, but how does he avoid being trapped, seeing how powerful she is? The only plausible result of that scenario is both Deven and the princess trapped in the tower, and that's pretty stupid. It would be easier if he wakens himself, or, better, struggles at the last minute against falling asleep--yes, that's better, since Deven really wouldn't just lie down and die like that. Hmm. Now we have to figure out how he's going to get into the tower.

"Kary, you're going to be late!" her mother admonished her, when she saw her gazing dreamily into her cereal bowl. "Do you have everything you need?"

"I think so," Kary said, stuffing the corn flakes into her mouth. "Oh! I almost forgot: I need to bring my math notebook today."

"Where is it? I'll go get it for you."

"On my desk. Thanks, Mom."

Her mother handed her her knapsack as she went out the door, and she tore off down the street. *I hate being late.*

Luck was with her when she got to school, because she saw Lynne just about to head down Mrs. Richards' hall.

"Lynne! Have you handed in your notebook yet?" Kary called as she ran up to her.

"I'm just about to."

"Could you take mine with you? I still have to go to my locker and get my stuff."

"Sure, no problem."

Kary handed her her knapsack. "It's in here--thanks a lot!"

"Slow down!" Lynne called after her, laughing. "You'll make it."

After such a tumultuous beginning, the rest of the day passed fairly uneventfully. Kary had plenty of time to plan out several versions of the tower scene in her mind; classes that day passed in a blur as she imagined and debated within herself all the potential twists and turns of plot yet to come.

There can't be a door into the tower, unless it's a magic door, so he'll have to find some way of breaking the magic spell. He's used the ring already -- say, what about his flute? Music can be magical, too. That's great, then we have three helpful things: the map, the ring, and the flute. I knew there had to be three of something. The map comes from the good witch, the ring comes from his father, and the flute comes from himself. That makes it appropriate that the flute be the one to open the tower. Hmm. But if he rescues the princess--oh, and what about her? is she going to be asleep? bewitched, so she doesn't want to leave? or shall we make it simpler and have her pacing the room anxiously trying to figure out how to escape?--once she's rescued, if he encounters Ridach again, what will defeat her this time? Because he really can't get away that easily. But he's used all his talismans once--can he use anything over again?

Kary was anxious to get home and start writing. The true test of a scene was always whether or not it held up after being written down. Fortunately for her, Trevor didn't seem to be at school that day, so on the way home she had nothing to take her mind away from the images that were crowding it. *Not that I wouldn't mind telling him about it, but, well, it's just as well I don't have to.*

Sitting down at her desk in her room, Kary eagerly reached for her notebook, her mind already forming the first sentence. *Where is the silly thing?* She shifted all the piles on her desk, but it wasn't there. *That's funny. I just had it last night. There it is.* On the floor, of course. Kary opened it up.

59 is what percent of 85?

Kary's heart stopped. *Oh, no.* This was her math notebook. She had handed in her story to Mrs. Richards. She buried her head in her hands. *Oh, help me. What have I done?*

Chapter 12 -- The Tower

Kary sat with her head bowed in despair, trying to fathom the dreadful mistake she had made. *Mrs. Richards has my story,* she kept repeating to herself, not being able to believe it. *Mrs. Richards has my story. What if she reads it?* She felt as though she had just offered her body as a sacrifice to some firey heathen god. It would be a painful experience to have anyone read her story unasked; to have Mrs. Richards read even just a little bit of it was unimaginable. *Oh, if only I hadn't been in such a rush--if only I had checked which notebook Mom picked up--if only I had taken it out of my knapsack before I gave it to Lynne. If only . . .* A new thought struck her: *What if she throws it out? What if she destroys my story?* It was too horrible to contemplate: Mrs. Richards reading her story, cackling contemptuously at it, and throwing it out because it was no good. She had to save it somehow from such an awful fate.

Kary grabbed the math notebook and ran downstairs to where her mother was cooking dinner in the kitchen. "Mom, I'm in big trouble. You've got to help me."

Her mother turned to her with her perpetual worried look. "What is it, Kary?"

"You're going to the parent-teacher night tonight, aren't you?"

"Oh! That's tonight? Well, I suppose your father will want to go. Why?"

"Remember my math notebook I was supposed to hand in today? You gave me the wrong one: that wasn't my math notebook at all!"

"I'm sorry, dear. It said 'Math' on the front."

"I know. It was my fault for not getting it myself. But I've got to get it back from Mrs. Richards before she notices it's the wrong one."

"I'm sure she'll understand that you made a mistake. I'll explain it to her when I go tonight."

"Yes, but that's not all. The notebook I handed in has very private stuff in it. I can't let her read it!"

"You mean it's your diary?"

"Sort-of, yeah."

"Oh, dear, that is too bad. But I'm not sure what we can do. Won't she have already looked at it?"

"Oh, I hope not. My life is ruined if she does!"

"Why? Do you say nasty things about her?"

"Not exactly, but . . ."

Her mother shook her head. "That's a lesson I learned the hard way, too. Never commit anything to paper you don't want other people to read. Not unless you keep it safely locked away! But I'll see what I can do. If she hasn't looked at it, I'll make sure she doesn't. Do you have the right notebook for me to take to her?"

"This is it." She handed the innocent-looking green coil notebook to her mother, feelng like a martyr about to be burned at the stake.

"Now don't worry about it, Kary. There's nothing more you can do. I'm sure it will work out all right in the end."

That's easy for you to say, Kary thought, turning away with a sigh. "Thanks, Mom," she remembered to say before she left the room.

My life is over, she was convinced. *Come on, Kary,* her more rational half argued. *It can't be that bad. What's the worst possible thing that could happen? Besides having Mrs. Richards read it, that is. Well, she could make a big deal of it in front of the class. That would be bad. Worse, she could tell my parents. That would be really bad.* What would her parents do, she wondered. Remembering her father's reaction to the character sketches, she didn't think he'd be too happy about a fairy tale. *Mom wouldn't mind if it were a diary, but she won't understand this. Maybe I can pretend it's a diary in code.*

Kary stewed over it all night long. Her wonderful ideas for the tower scene flew from her mind as she pondered the rescue, not of the princess, but of the whole story. *They'll probably burn it*, she thought morbidly, *if Mrs. Richards hasn't already.*

Now more than ever she wished she could talk to someone about it. Just sharing the anxiety would help a lot. *Louise. If only I had told her about the story when we were in the clearing. But if I called her now, I'd have to explain everything. What am I going to do?*

As it turned out, Kary didn't have to explain anything to Louise. Louise called later that evening, full of concern and sympathy.

"Kary! Are your parents home yet?"

"No, they're at the parent-teacher interviews."

"Yes, I know. So were mine. I need to warn you: I think yours are pretty upset."

Oh, no. "Why? What happened?"

"My parents were in Mrs. Richards' class at the same time as yours, and they overheard--they couldn't help it, Mrs. Richards talks so loud--she was telling your parents what you handed in instead of your math book."

This is it. This is the end. "What did she say?"

"Well, she seemed to think it was some kind of deliberate insult--you handed in a fairy tale instead of your math work. Did you really?"

"Not on purpose!"

"No, of course not. But did you really write a fairy tale?"

"I'm still writing it," Kary demurred. "It's not done."

"That's so neat. Why didn't you tell me you wrote things?"

"Well . . . " What could she say?

"Of course," Louise interjected. "It's a very private thing. But could I read it when you're done? I mean, if you want to show it to anyone."

"I'd love to let you read it." Louise was all right. She would read it in the right way. "So long as my parents don't burn it first."

"Oh yeah, that's right. My parents couldn't hear what yours were saying, but they didn't seem very happy."

"No, they wouldn't be. I'm going to get killed. But thanks for warning me. I'm glad it was your parents who overheard."

"Well, they wouldn't have told me about it except they thought it was a great object lesson: 'aren't you glad you're not as foolish as that girl' -kind of thing. I felt so bad for you I just had to call."

"Thanks a lot, really. Oh, no, there's the door opening. Well, I'm in for it now."

"Good luck," Louise said.

"I'm going to need it. Here they come. Bye."

"Bye." She hung up the phone just as her mother called her.

"Kary?"

"I'm in my room."

"We'd like to have a word with you."

Come on up. I've said my prayers .

Both parents had on their most serious faces when they came into her room. Her mother looked mostly sorrowful, her father mostly stern. All together it was a formidable combination.

"I'm sure you know what we're here to talk about," her father began.

"Mrs. Richards read my story and told you what a horrible student I must be," Kary ventured.

Her father seemed a little taken aback by her bluntness. "Essentially, yes."

"She had no right to read it. She should have seen that it was private and left it alone."

"It did say 'Mathematics' on the front," her mother reminded her. "She thought you'd handed it in deliberately, to flaunt her."

"You know that's not true! It was entirely an accident!"

"Yes, yes," her father said impatiently, "but the point is, what were you doing writing a 'story' in the first place?"

"It was just for fun. I only worked on it after all my homework was done." That wasn't entirely true, but close enough.

"Oh, Kary, it's just not healthy for a 12-year old girl to be spending all her time reading and writing fairy tales," her mother exclaimed.

"And besides being unhealthy, it's a waste of time," her father added.

"Why is writing fairy tales any more a waste of time than going shopping with friends, or talking on the phone, or, or taking piano lessons, for that matter."

"Well, your mother is concerned that you're not making friends, and this is probably the reason why." (*I have friends*, Kary thought.) "My concern is a little different: I don't want you to make the same mistake as Brian did." (*Oh boy, here we go again.*) "You see, we thought Brian's music was a harmless pastime, a skill that might come in useful one day, a hobby that he'd outgrow. But he became obsessed with it. He made it out to be much more important than it really is, and he ended up giving up everything else in order to pursue it. Now, who knows where he is. He'll never be able to get a decent job without his high school diploma--if he wants to make anything of himself he's going to have to go back and start all over."

Her mother continued the lecture. "Your writing may seem like it's just for fun now, but we're worried that you might start taking it too seriously." Her eyes filled with tears at this point. "I don't want to lose another child," she finished sadly.

A fierce struggle was going on inside Kary. Part of her was seduced by her parents' logic: yes, of course, writing is silly, it doesn't mean anything, and I should give it up and get on with my life. But the greater part of her was full of anger at their insinuations: what do you mean, I might start taking it too seriously? it is serious! This was the half that won, perhaps stirred to speak more by her mother's tears than by anything she said.

"For heaven's sake, mother, I'm not going to drop out of junior high school and run away from home! And you know what else? I don't think Brian would have left home either if you hadn't made him."

"Kary!" her mother exclaimed, horrified. But Kary was wound up with many months of anger and frustration, and wouldn't be stopped.

"I mean it. If you hadn't told him how stupid his music was, if you hadn't forbidden him to play, he would have stuck around, finished high school, probably even gone to university. We could have been proud of him--he could really have gone somewhere. But you kicked him out."

"We did no such thing, Kary, and you know it." Her father was starting to sound angry, but still she ignored his warning.

"You were afraid of him, weren't you. You were afraid of his talent, afraid he really would become a musician. And now you're afraid I'm going to be a writer. Well, that's what I'm going to be. Even though it doesn't fit in with your normal, average, mediocre world, I'm going to write fairy tales, and you can't stop me!"

"Kary! That's enough! I don't know what's gotten into you, young lady, but you've started your mother crying, and I won't have that. It's obvious you're just trying to hurt us, the way Brian did. You'll never be a writer. If you'd listen to us, you'd know we're doing this for your own good. Writing is not a practical career to pursue. One in a million who try might make it, and chances are you won't be that one. You're obviously too young to understand that now, and that's why we have to be firm with you. You will not write any more stories. Do you understand?"

Kary was crying now, too, but she wasn't about to give in that easily. Staring down at her hands in her lap, she shook her head.

Her father seemed about to explode again, but he controlled himself and said merely, "Fine. We'll let you sleep on it."

They got up to leave, and Kary looked up at them. "My notebook?" she dared ask.

"We're keeping that," her father replied shortly, and the two of them left the room.

Great. They've taken hostages. She sat on her bed, crying, feeling nothing but pain for a long time. At last she turned around, leaned her head on the windowsill and stared into the blue darkness outside as the hurts separated themselves and floated into her thoughts.

I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to hurt you. I never want to hurt you, but I can't seem to help myself. You just don't understand. Dad doesn't understand at all--oh why, why can't he see? It's true about Brian, I know it: Dad forced him to go. Dad wouldn't let him be himself, so he had to leave, or else die, really. Oh Brian, I'm so sorry you had to go. Is it all ruined then, your hopes? Is Dad right? Will you never make anything of yourself now?

She cried for a long time about Brian; then the rest of her father's words returned to her memory, and she began crying about herself. *You'll never be a writer. One in a million, and it won't be you. Oh, father, how can you be so cruel. Give me a chance at least to prove myself; don't cut me down before I even begin. You can't be right; you don't really know that I can't make it. Oh please, please, let me try.*

Only now that she was faced with giving up her writing did she realize how important it really was. It *was* her center, her source: without it she wouldn't be Kary. And, knowing this now, she went to bed with the words ringing over and over again in her head. *You'll never be a writer, you'll never be a writer.*

Kary woke up the next morning in the middle of a dream about Caralisle: Deven was taking her on a tour through the kingdom, and they had just reached Pavalis when the alarm sounded. She dragged herself out of bed, still trying to continue the dream, and showered and dressed as her mind wandered through the palace halls and gardens. *I'll have to tell Louise about Caralisle. She'll love it.*

Then she remembered last night, and the dream shattered into a million sparkling pieces that twinkled and were gone. She sat down heavily on her bed and put her head in her hands.

Now, Kary, keep control of yourself. You've cried enough.

But I get math first thing this morning. I can't possibly walk into that classroom again. I can't face Mrs. Richards.

Fine. Don't go to Math today. But you have to act normal. Nothing's wrong. You're fine. Right?

Right. I'm fine.

Having successfully battled herself for control, Kary went downstairs with a bland, expressionless face--or what she hoped was a bland, expressionless face--and ate breakfast in a disdainful silence. Her mother watched her worriedly, and finally asked tentatively how she was.

"Oh, I'm fine, Mom," Kary responded airily; then she relented. After all, Mom wasn't the enemy. She couldn't help it if she didn't understand. "I'm okay, really. Still angry, but okay."

"Oh, dear, you know we only want what's best for you."

"I know, Mom, and," she had to swallow hard before she could get this out: "thanks for your concern." She couldn't help adding, "But I still think I'm right."

"Oh, Kary," her mother said softly, sadly. "You're so young."

"But growing older every minute," Kary replied flippantly as she took her dish to the sink, giving her Mom an awkward pat on the shoulder as she went by to take the sting out of her manner. "I'd better go. Wouldn't want to be late for math class! See you later."

Kary worried about her mother as she walked leisurely towards the ravine. *She must really think she's a failure with her kids. What an awful feeling.* For the first time, Kary found herself looking at the world through her mother's eyes, and it came as a revelation to her that her mother had feelings, too, had hopes and dreams and disappointments. Kary entered the ravine wishing she could give something to her mother, something that would let her know it was all right, she was an okay Mom, she hadn't failed.

I wish I could be normal, like Megan, and have lots of friends and be worried about boys and do okay at school. Then she'd understand me and stop worrying so much about me. Of course, she doesn't seem to understand Megan that well, either. I guess I just don't know what she wants.

The snow-clad trees of the ravine were so beautiful, the woods so white, so perfect, it brought tears to Kary's eyes. An intense longing filled her: longing for what, she didn't know, but she ached inside, wanting, needing whatever it was that made the trees whole. *I love you, Mom. I love you, Brian. Why does it have to hurt so much?* Tears blurred her vision and she wandered blindly towards her clearing. *I love you, Deven. It's the same feeling: it hurts just as much. I want to give myself to you, and I can't. I can't share myself with anyone; they're all so far away I can't reach them. Dad, you're so far away.*

She sat down on one of the snowy thrones at the edge of her clearing and cried until she was completely empty inside. Then she sat up, wiped her eyes, and tried to breathe normally. She washed her face with snow, and the icy shock helped turn her mind onto mundane, ordinary things. She buried her longing and her pain under layers of practical thoughts and got up to walk to school, steeling her self to venture out into the real world again, face the imposing puce hallways, hide from Mrs. Richards all day.

"Kary! There you are," said Louise when she saw her. "I was getting worried."

"I just couldn't face Mrs. Richards today. Did she say anything when I wasn't there?"

"No, she just looked smug. But you'd better stay out of her way all day."

"Tell me about it. You'll keep a lookout for me, won't you."

"Of course. So, how did it go last night?"

"Pretty awful. I'll tell you about it at lunch."

At lunch time they found a secluded spot, and Kary poured out her story to an appreciative listener. It made such a difference to be able to tell someone who knew what it was all about, knew what she must be feeling, what her struggle was. She was offering part of herself to Louise, and Louise accepted her.

When she'd finished telling everything, Louise hit the nail on the head when she asked, "So, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I wish . . ." She stopped, trying to put her conflict into words. "I wish I could agree with them. Sometimes I almost do: all day today this voice inside my head has been going, 'Kary, they're right. It's a childish thing to do, and it's time to grow up. There's no point in hanging on to old fantasies--look at Anne of Green Gables. She quit making up stories to help Marilla and become a responsible school teacher."

"Yes," interrupted Louise, "but L.M. Montgomery didn't, did she."

"Oh, I know," Kary cried, "and that's what another part of my brain says: what if I can become a writer? I shouldn't give up, should I? But I've got an answer to that, too: my parents are so hyper-distressed about everything ever since Brian left, that it's hardly fair of me to make their lives--and mine--miserable by persisting in doing what they're so freaked out about. Do you know what I mean?"

Louise was laughing, not at Kary but at the way she was explaining herself. "Somehow, yes, I do know what you mean."

"If you could see my mother these days--it would be cruel to openly flaunt her by continuing to write. Frankly, it would just be a whole lot easier to quit and become a normal, ideal little daughter."

"I know how that is. And you don't think you could keep writing in secret, just like you go through the ravine?"

"I could, I suppose, although I'd probably end up being super tense all the time--did I tell you what happened when I met a boy I know in the ravine? Remind me to tell you ..

later. The biggest problem is that they still have my story. At some point I'd have to ask them to give it back, and they'd want to know why."

"So you're going to give up writing," Louise concluded for her, always coming back to the main point.

Kary hadn't really decided that, despite all her arguments, and the sound of it made her heart sink into her stomach. "Louise," she began, a little hesitantly, "is there anything you do, that, when you do it, you feel completely real, completely yourself? Do you know what I mean? Something that totally possesses you and exhilerates you and makes you feel the most alive you've ever been?"

Louise thought about it for a while. "I think I know what you mean. I feel that way sometimes when I'm solving math problems."

"Math problems!"

"Hard to believe, I know! But I really like the feeling of working through something, doing step after step and having everything fall into place at the end. It's like the way I feel when I'm trying to fix something. I love it when I have to figure things out: it uses all of my brain, all of me--I guess you could say it possesses me."

"I can see that. You're that kind of a person. Methodical, sort of, but creative, too. You should be an engineer."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that. But what about you? What makes you feel most like Kary?"

"Writing. Imagining things and then finding the right words to express them. Sometimes it just flows out of me and I forget about everything else and I am the story, the words. It's an incredible feeling."

"Wow."

"You see, I don't think I could give that up. No matter how hard it is or who it hurts."

"You do have a dilemma."

The bell rang, and the two girls packed up their lunches in companionable silence. Louise understood, Kary knew, but she had already made her decision. There were things more important to her than her selfhood. She would fulfill her family's dreams before she would even consider her own.

Maybe I'm being selfish, Kary thought. *I accused Brian of being selfish, and I suppose he was. How do you decide when someone else should be more important than yourself?*

They were late for Science class, and came in to the typically chaotic scene of work groups being formed.

"I guess we'll work together, eh?" Louise stated as they sat down.

"Sorry, Sonya, we're already a group," they overheard Jessica say just then, and Kary noticed how Sonya's face fell. *I know how she feels,* Kary thought, and with the thought came a sudden revelation.

"Do you want to work with Louise and me?" she asked Sonya, and was rewarded with a smile.

"Sure."

Lynne eventually joined them, too, and it ended up being a fun group. When Sonya wasn't trying to be popular she could be very nice, Kary discovered. *And all this time I thought* _*she*_ *was a snob because she never invited* _*me*_ *to join* _*her*_*. I guess Megan's right again.*

This was something she wanted to discuss with Trevor; she felt she was on the verge of discovering something truly important, if she could just work it all through. Today she was relieved to find him waiting for her outside the school.

"Greetings, comrade. What chance befell you yesterday?"

"Oh," he blushed. "I got a detention for not handing in my homework. It was my Mom's fault. She cleaned up my room and I couldn't find anything."

Kary laughed. "I'm sure that excuse went over well!"

He looked a bit hurt. "It's not an excuse. It's true! Well, all right, I guess it's almost as bad as 'my dog ate it,' isn't it."

Kary nodded, grinning. "Uh huh. But listen: I've come up with a new theory and I need to see what you think."

"Shoot."

So Kary told him about Sonya, and about being shy, and wanting other people to make friends first, and therefore seeming like a snob.

"That makes sense," he said. "So really what you're saying is it's stupid to be afraid of what other people think, because they're probably just as afraid of what you think."

"Yes. And it's even more stupid not to do something you want to do because you're afraid of what other people think." Yes, oh yes. That was it, wasn't it? Wasn't that her answer? But she wasn't afraid of what her parents thought about her writing; she knew they hated it.

Trevor was about to say something, but she shushed him up. "Wait--I've got an idea in the back of my head. Let me get it out."

He listened patiently as she tried to vocalize what she was beginning to understand. "It's all about fitting in, right? Everyone tries to fit in wherever they are. When you're at home, you do the things your parents expect you to do, so they'll accept you, and when you're at school, you try and do the things the other kids expect, so you'll fit in there."

"But what if you don't fit in anywhere, no matter what you do?"

"I'm getting to that. The thing is, I don't think you can really fit in anywhere unless you fit inside yourself."

"What do you mean?"

It was so hard to explain: she saw it in images. The clearing was what she was thinking of, but she didn't think Trevor would understand that. "Picture your brain as a big, empty room," she began.

"Is it for rent?"

"Oh, come on! Although, seriously, I suppose some people's are. But ours aren't. Your room is, well, your possibilities, your potential. All your dreams and imaginings, everything you want to be and could be. Your inner, real self, I guess. Now your outer self is the things you say and do, your fears and braveries, your decisions to do or not to do things. Are you following me? Now picture your outer self inside your room. Do you fit?"

"I see what you mean!" Trevor was very excited. "If you never do what you want to do, never live up to what you might be able to do, you'll be too small for yourself."

"Exactly! That's it! And if you're so small you feel alone and scared just living in yourself, how on earth can you feel comfortable anywhere else?" Trevor nodded enthusiastically as she continued. "Today when I invited Sonya to work with us, I felt myself get bigger, if you know what I mean, and I felt more, well, more like I fit in." *And writing makes me feel huge, like I'm filling up my room and stretching the walls. If I stopped writing,* she pictured a great huge room with a small, lonely person standing in the middle of it. *That's how I'd feel. All alone in the middle of me.* The thought made her want to cry.

"So a snob would be someone who's too small for himself, and has to put other people down in order to pretend he's bigger," Trevor was saying. He was fired up with her idea and had dozens of further applications of it. It was much easier to discuss social psychology with him than to continue wondering about her life, so she made no reference to her problem. *I'll tell him about my writing one day. If I'm still writing, that is.*

Theories were all very fine and good, but when Kary walked into her house she knew at once that no amount of theorizing was going to solve her problem. The tension was thick enough to cut. (*I always thought they were exaggerating when they said that.*) Dinner was an awkward, subdued affair that night. Her mother looked worried, almost guilty, her father looked formidable, and Megan looked sullen. Kary didn't know what she looked like, but she certainly didn't feel like talking, so she ate as silently as the others. Just before she got up to clear her dishes, her father asked,

"Have you been thinking about our discussion?"

"Yes."

"Have you come to any decision?"

"No. Not yet."

He scowled, but she escaped up to her room, where she tried, unsuccessfully, to get her mind off the tension by doing homework.

"Good night, Kary," her mother came by later on to say. "Sleep well."

"Thanks, Mom."

But she didn't sleep well. Several hours later she was still awake, staring at the wall where a stray moonbeam was dancing, here again and gone again at the mercy of the scudding clouds.

Scudding clouds. What a wonderful image. Wide awake and wanting to enjoy the magic of midnight, Kary crept out of bed and down the stairs into the family room. Emptied of family and full of moonlight, it seemed ethereal, holy, almost like a cathedral or a temple. Kneeling on the sofa beside the window, Kary looked out and worshipped the night: the wild, clear darkness, the cold, wise stars, the burning, silver moon. It filled her with poetry, and she knew that she had made her decision already.

"Kary?" came a whisper from behind her, making her jump.

"Megan! What are you doing up?" she whispered back.

"I couldn't sleep. What about you?"

"I couldn't sleep either," Kary replied simply. Her older sister sat down on the edge of the couch and put her hands between her knees. Kary looked back out the window, not knowing what else to say.

"So what are you going to do?" Megan asked, after a pause.

"About what?" Kary replied, not knowing how much Megan knew.

"About whatever Dad was talking about. He seemed really mad: not shouting mad, but glowering mad, and that's never any good. At least when he shouts you can get it over with."

"Yeah. I'm afraid of what he's going to do to me when I tell him."

"Tell him what?" Megan seemed anxious.

"Well, he wants me to stop writing stories, and I'm not going to."

"Are you going to run away?"

"Of course not. I'm only 12 years old!"

"I know, but . . . "

"I know. Brian was only 17. He's a boy, too, remember. It's different for guys." She paused. "I know how he felt, though. Sometimes I wish I could run away, but that wouldn't solve anything."

Megan surprised Kary completely with her next comment. "You two are so lucky. It's not fair."

"Lucky? Brian had to leave home and I'm going to get grounded for the rest of my life, and we're lucky?"

"At least you've got something worth being grounded for. Something worth arguing about, worrying about, running away about. I don't have anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Brian had his music, you have your writing: what do I have? I'm just plain, average Megan. Nothing special, just a typical kid. I can be ignored."

"But--just the other day you were telling me that that's why you're such a success. 'Be average,' you said."

"You call being ignored a success?"

Kary was stunned. With all Megan's unkindness and anger, she never would have guessed her older sister was jealous of her.

"It was always you and Brian," Megan continued. "You did everything together. You had your own private jokes, he wrote songs for you . . . "

"But you were always off doing something else. You were out with your friends, or at a track meet, or whatever. You always seemed like you were having so much fun! You didn't need us. We were the odd ones out." Kary remembered Sonya, and stopped suddenly.

"You didn't need me," Megan said softly. There was a silence. The moonlight broke against the trees and flung bits of foam across the snow as the high clouds continued sailing before the wind. Kary felt tears running down her face and saw that Megan was crying, too.

"What are we going to do," she whispered. Then they were hugging each other, crying into each other's shoulders, crying for each other, for Brian, for loneliness, for relief. Megan broke away first and went into the kitchen to get kleenexes.

"Will you write a story about me someday?" she asked as she proffered the box to Kary, surprizing Kary yet again.

"Sure, if you want me to. If I can think of another one."

"Make it about a middle child. It's always the oldest or the youngest in the fairy tales that gets to do everything; nothing ever happens to the one in the middle. Make it a story about how a plain, boring, ordinary middle child ends up doing something extraordinary."

"You know, that's sort of what my story is about already. I can make my hero the middle child, if you like; that would work. He lives with a woodcutter all his life until he goes off to find who his real father is, rescues a princess, and finds out his father is a king. He can be the middle son of the king who nobody thought anything would happen to."

"I'll have to read it," said Megan, a glimmer of an amused smile in her eyes.

"You know, I always thought it was Brian's story, because it's about someone going off to seek his fortune, but it isn't, really, is it."

"I don't know," Megan laughed. "It's your story." She yawned suddenly, and Kary followed suit. "Come on," she said. "Let's go to bed."

The moonlight blessed them as they left the sanctuary and crept back to the darkness of their rooms. Kary slept deep and peacefully, and when she awoke the next morning she remembered only feelings of oceans from her dreams, and she felt clean.

Chapter 13 - The Flute

When Kary went to Math class that morning and Mrs. Richards didn't look at her for the whole class, she wondered what was up. When she got her notebook back and the only comment on it was, "Could be neater," she knew that somehow, inexplicably, she had won. The war against Kary was over; Mrs. Richards had surrendered.

Even Lynne noticed the difference. "The witch didn't say a single nasty thing to you all class," she said in the hall afterwards. "I thought for sure she'd get you for missing yesterday. I wonder what's up."

"Yeah," said Louise. "Especially after what happened, I figured she'd be gloating all over you."

"Why? What happened?" asked Lynne.

"Oh, on Parent Teacher Night she told my parents what a horrible student I am, and they came home and bawled me out," Kary explained quickly.

"Maybe your parents got mad at her for being so down on you," suggested Lynne.

The thought had never occured to Kary, but at once she could see it was probably true. Her father could get on her case all he wanted, but, now that she thought of it, she knew he would never put up with other people criticizing his family. The switched notebook episode suddenly took on a whole new light.

She pondered the implications of Lynne's suggestion all during L.A. class. Just as she was about to leave, she was surprised by Miss Krawchuck asking to see her.

"Kary? Did you forget to hand in your book report?"

My book report. Oh, my gosh, I forgot all about it this month!

The teacher could tell by Kary's expression that she had done more than forget to hand it in. "Can you have something for me by tomorrow?" she suggested.

"I haven't even read a book yet," Kary confessed. "But I can have it done by Monday."

"I'm surprised you haven't read a book recently," Miss Krawchuck said with a smile. "What have you been doing instead?"

Kary blushed. "Writing, actually," she replied shyly.

"I was going to ask you about that," the teacher responded. "How is it going?"

"It's almost done," Kary said. She decided not to say anything about her parents' objections. After all, that was between her parents and her.

"I hope I get to see it," said Miss Krawchuck. "Tell you what. I'll forgive the two late days on your book report if you hand in your story as well. Call it an extra assignment."

"I don't think it will be done by Monday--especially not if I have to write a book report."

Miss Krawchuck laughed. "Hand it in when it's done, then. But before Christmas, I hope. I'll consider it a Christmas present."

"Before Christmas, for sure," Kary replied, feeling once again the warm thrill of hearing her story approved.

She went home that day feeling more confident and happy than she remembered feeling in a long time. Between them, the two teachers had given her a strategy for approaching her father. She was no longer angry at him. He was not the enemy either. Mrs. Richards may have been, but he had defeated her.

Kary decided to get it over with at suppertime. After all, it was a family affair; everyone deserved to be there. Megan raised her eyebrows at Kary when they sat down at the table, and when Kary nodded, her sister crossed her fingers for her. Mom had outdone herself on the meal--always her attempt at atonement--and it seemed to work at least a bit, because it was hard to remain upset for long while eating roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Even Kary's father seemed to have mellowed since yesterday.

"Dad," Kary said, at a moment when he seemed to be particularly enjoying the meal, "what did you say to Mrs. Richards on Parent Teacher Night, when she told you how horrible I was?"

He looked surprised. "It's not really your place to know, but among other things I told her she was an interfering busybody who had no right to judge my daughter."

"Then I have to thank you," Kary said. "Today was the first day all year she hasn't found some excuse to pick on me. I wondered what had happened."

"She normally picks on you in class?" her father asked, looking concerned.

"She made a point of noticing every time I did something wrong and making some remark about it."

"In front of the whole class?" exclaimed her mother.

"Yeah."

"That is very unprofessional behavior," her father said. "You let me know if she continues."

"Well, whatever you said to her, it seems to have worked," Kary said.

"Glad to hear it," her father replied. "Some of these teachers think they can get away with anything. Who was that teacher you had last year, Megan, the one who never marked any of your assignments?"

"Oh, you mean Mr. Galan. He was awful."

Kary was happy to see his anger directed elsewhere. It would make her next step much easier. She waited until dessert came and everyone stopped to admire the chocolate cream pie. Then, when the business of eating it was well underway, she took a deep breath, looked at Megan for encouragement, and said,

"Mom, Dad, I have a proposition to make."

"What is it, dear?" asked her mother.

"It's a deal, really. I would like to propose that as long as I keep my average above 80%, I still be allowed to write."

Her mother shot a quick, worried glance at her father, who looked as though something dangerous had just landed in his lap. "That seems fair," she said. "Doesn't it, dear?"

Kary's father didn't respond for a minute or so, and the room became tense again. At last he shook his head. "I'm disappointed that you haven't understood our concern," he said. "Keeping your marks up is only a part of it." Kary's heart sank. He was going to refuse her peace offering, and it was all she had to offer. He wasn't finished yet, though. "Unfortunately, it looks as though you're going to have to learn your lesson the hard way. I want you to know that I disapprove, but, for your mother's sake, I'll accept your 'deal.' The above 80 rule will be strictly enforced, however."

Well, he hadn't exactly made peace, but she had what she wanted, so Kary was satisfied. There was just one more thing. "Does this mean I get my notebook back?" she asked.

Her father drew his brows together. She was pushing him too far. "If you must," he said shortly.

"I'll tell you why I need it," Kary added, still hoping to reconcile with him. "Miss Krawchuck knows I'm writing a story, and she asked me to finish it and hand it in to her before Christmas. Sort of a Christmas present, she said."

"Oh, what a wonderful idea," exclaimed her mother.

"Hmm," said her father noncommitally. "Beth, this was a wonderful meal. You really outdid yourself this time."

So the discussion was over, and peace, of a kind, was restored.

Kary faithfully spent the next two days working on her book report, but when the weekend came there was nothing to prevent her from rejoining Deven in the Swamp. She held the worn notebook in her hands a few moments before beginning and flipped through the pages pleasantly wrinkled with writing, enjoying the feel of her story restored to her.

All this: I wrote all of this. And to think it might have been lost forever. She shuddered at the thought.

Then she turned to the first page and began work in earnest. As she entered the story itself, retracing Deven's journey starting from the clearing in the forest, she saw it all with a new perspective. Time away from writing had given her the distance she needed to evaluate her words, compare the vision in her head to what was actually down on paper. She made a few changes--words that didn't sound right, sentences that fell awkwardly on the ear--but on the whole she was very pleased with the story. It did what she wanted it to do. The manuscript already looked like a war zone, with its doodles and crossings out and addings in; by the time she finished her revisions it was almost impossible to read the story. But she knew what was there, underneath and inbetween all that ink; she knew every word of it.

Guess I'm going to have to recopy this before I give it to Miss Krawchuck, she laughed to herself. *But first, to finish it* . She started reading again where Deven entered the swamp, immersed herself in its putrid greyness, entered Deven's head as he began to faint from hunger and thirst, believed with him that the tower was an illusion, and that he was about to die. And she knew what had to happen next.

Deven's last thought before he sank into oblivion was of the princess. "I hope she'll forgive me for failing," he murmured as the darkness of sleep closed over his head.

The princess! Deven struggled back awake. It was all very well to lie down and die himself, but he couldn't fail her, not when he was her only chance of rescue. He sat up and shook his head, trying to clear the enchantment from it.

"Come on, Deven," he muttered to himself, "wake up. Get out of this dream and back into the swamp. Your quest isn't over yet." He rubbed his eyes with his hands and then looked around. He was no longer sleepy, but the grass and flowers were still there. So was the stream, and so was that absurd tower.

"This is not real," he told himself fiercely, trying to break the spell with willpower. But none of it would go away. Frustrated, he marched into the mist that surrounded the lawn, and walked right into the swamp. "Now *this* *is real," he said, standing ankle deep in mud. But when he turned around, vaguely through the mist he could still see the grass, the flowers, and the tower. Then, at last, he remembered Ridach's words: "No one will be able to believe it's there."*

"Ridach's tower?" he questioned, staring through the mist at the white shape. As if in response to his belief, the image seemed to waver and become insubstantial. That settled it. "This is Ridach's tower," he said with conviction, and marched back towards the now almost invisible shape. The closer he got to it, the less effect the spell had, and when he was right beside it he could touch the very real stones it was built of. They were grey, rather than white, and very old. "Just as a witch's tower ought to look," Deven thought approvingly, daring it to disappear. It didn't.

He walked all the way around it, but could find no openings, or signs there was an opening. "Of course not," he said to himself. "What did you expect?" Then he shouted, "Princess?" as loudly as he could, but, as he expected, there was no answer.

Returning to where he had laid his pack, Deven sat down on the grass to ponder this new challenge. He pulled his flute out of his pack--it was amazingly undamaged after all it had been through--and began to play a simple tune to help him think. The music floated up and filled the air with its sweet sound; Deven thought his little instrument had never sounded quite so good.

He began improvising on the tune, adding bits of melody that reflected the different parts of his journey: a low, mysterious theme for the forest of Arman and the witches' cottage; something bright and sparkling for Payalis; an airy, windy theme for the first lake crossing, and an eerie, dreamy one for the second; the swamp was minor and slow, until he got to the tower, where he modulated back into major and played out his triumph at defeating Ridach's spell. The one common thread in all these melodies Deven then pulled *out and turned into a melody of its own. It was his original tune, changed and deepened by all the new themes; it was the Princess' theme.*

All the while he played, music seemed to be growing around him: echoes, resonances of his tune quivered in the air and made his hair stand on end. When he took the flute from his lips, the sound continued undimished, and he felt a powerful magic begin to happen. Before his eyes, a bright line appeared in the side of the tower; it grew taller, then abruptly turned and turned again until a doorway was outlined in light. Before Deven could do or say anything, the doorway began to open, spilling light across the lawn. At last a golden rectangle was revealed, in the middle of which stood the figure of a girl.

--Oh wow. That's really neat.

As Kary wrote those words, the image filled her mind; she felt as though the door were opening insider her, spilling golden light all through her brain. And she felt as though she were standing in the doorway looking out at a world lit from within her. She sighed happily. *When it all comes together, it really is right,* she thought, and Genesis came unexpectedly to mind: "And God saw the light, that it was good."

She laughed. "Sure Kary. Write a half-decent scene and start thinking you're God! Now stop gloating and get back to work."

Deven scrambled to his feet as the girl approached. "Your--Your Majesty," he said, not knowing what was the proper way to address a princess.

She stopped before him, her long, chestnut hair glowing golden in the light. "I heard music," she said softly, wondering. "Was it you who was playing?"

"Sort-of," said Deven, blushing. "There was magic around, too,"

"Who are you, that you can command such magic?" she asked, wide eyed.

"Oh, my lady, I don't command anything," Deven hastily explained. He was acutely conscious of his muddy feet and still-damp clothes. "I'm no one. I was just playing my flute, and, well, something else took over."

"I can't believe you are no one," the princess smiled beautifully. "A no one would not be here in the middle of the Swamp of Sinmole, playing his flute to rescue me from my prison."

"Oh, well, it's a long story," Deven murmured bashfully. "My name is Deven. But I'm afraid I haven't finished rescuing you yet. We still have the whole swamp to go back through." He was eyeing her long, silk gown with concern.

"My name is Tatania," she said politely, "and I'm not worried about getting dirty, if that's your concern. I can walk well enough, too, so you may lay those fears to rest. As for the witch," Tatania continued, quite practical now that she knew what she was dealing with, "Ridach has yet to reappear after locking me in here. If it weren't for the food that appears every day, I'd be sure she's forgotten all about me. Perhaps we can get away before she notices I've escaped."

"I hope so," said Deven. At that moment, the tower door swung shut with a bang. They jumped and turned towards it. The tower stood grey and forbidding, with no indication that it had ever had an opening. Twilight surrounded them now that the light from the doorway was gone; they hadn't noticed the sun going down, but it was now quite dark..

"This isn't good at all," said Deven. "We'll drown ourselves if we try to go through the swamp at night. I'm afraid we'll have to risk staying here until morning."

"Is there anywhere we can hide?" Tatania asked.

But it was too late.

"Treachery! Traitor! Spy!" screeched a voice from the other side of the tower, and before they could move Ridach was bearing down in fury upon them. "You repay our hospitality with this?" she shook her bony finger at Deven, who stood petrified with fear

before her. "You spy out our secrets and plot to destroy our most careful, most brilliant plans? You and that traitor Morag--you should be burned alive!" Her long black hair writhed around her shoulders as she gestured and her beady eyes glittered with hate. She seemed to be made out of darkness, and the darkness of falling night seemed to flow out from her.

Tatania and Deven stared at each other with helpless fear in their eyes. Deven couldn't believe he had failed now, after all he'd gone through. Ridach turned to Tatania and Deven winced as the witch's anger was directed towards the princess.

"As for you, my little pretty: Back into the tower! I'll not have you escaping out of my clutches now, when I'm so close to having it all!" She waved her arm at the black tower, and a deeper shadow appeared where the golden doorway had been before. Tatania sent a sorrowing look at Deven and turned towards the tower.

"No!", cried Deven, almost without thinking. He couldn't bear to see her reenter the dark prison. "No," he repeated, as Ridach and Tatania turned towards him. "She can't go back in there." He had nothing else to offer, no power to match against Ridach, no hidden weapon to save the day; he could only wait to see what the witch would do to him.

Ridach cackled when he remained silent, and thrust her pointed nose towards his face. "If you think your ring will serve you now, you think foolishly, young churl," she spat at him. "It has power of a sort, but it is nothing compared to the power I command. Watch!" She pointed at a spot on the ground a few feet from where they were standing, and a huge fire suddenly appeared, roaring and crackling with fierce heat that made all three step back several paces into the protection of the cool night.

"I could turn you into a blazing fire," she boasted to Deven, who tried not to shudder with fear. He knew this was going to happen; the least he could do would be to face it bravely and try to spare Tatania

"You can do anything you want to me," he said. "Just let the princess go."

Ridach cackled again. "You can't bargain with your life--it means nothing to me. I'd be just as happy to leave you wandering forever in the swamp. I just want you out of my way."

"Oh, please don't hurt him," Tatania suddenly said. Deven's heart skipped a beat at the tone in her voice. Their eyes met in the flickering light from Ridach's fire, but when the witch saw the exchange of glances she made an impatient gesture dousing the fire and plunging them into darkness.

At that moment, the full moon rose above the mists of the swamp and poured its white light into the clearing around the tower. The witch cried out in agony and continued to wail as the brilliant orb sailed higher into the sky. The clear moonbeams that bathed Tatania and Deven in silver splendor seemed to pierce Ridach like a sword. She turned grey, as if the darkness were being drained out of her.

Deven sprang across to Tatania and grasped the hand that was waiting for him. Without needing to speak they turned together and began running towards the swamp.

"No, come back," wailed Ridach. "Come back."

What happened next neither Deven nor Tatania could ever properly describe. As they entered the mists of the swamp, they were surrounded by moonlight, and for a moment they felt as though they were floating on moonbeams. When they could again feel the ground beneath their feet, the mist was gone, the swamp was gone, the tower and Ridach were all gone as though they had never existed. Only the moon was still there, rising higher and more distant in a clear, starry sky, sending a path of moonlight down towards the two bemused youth. Deven and Tatania felt as though they had just awakened from a deep sleep filled with strange and wonderful dreams.

"Morag," murmured Deven. "It must have been her."

"Who?"

Deven turned to his companion. He had so much to tell her. "I'll explain it all later," he said, hoping she would understand. She did.

"Look," she said, "there's a lake over there. I wonder . . ."

They ran towards it. It was Lake Tamas-ah. Confused, relieved, but most of all tired, Deven and Tatania found a sheltered spot by the lake shore and went to sleep, watched over all night long by the moon.

Kary sighed deeply as she closed the notebook and turned out her light. Her story was back, the rescue went perfectly, all was right with the world.

"Hi, Louise, how was your weekend?"

"Not bad. How about you?"

"Great! I'm almost finished my story."

"No way! I can't wait to read it. Is your Dad still giving you the guilt trip?"

"Hard to tell. I don't see a whole lot of him."

As she talked, Kary put her books in her locker and took out her L.A. binder. On top of it she placed her book report, so she'd remember to hand it in.

"We weren't supposed to hand anything in today, were we?" Louise asked, seeing the report.

"Oh no. This is my book report from last week. I completely forgot to do it, so Miss Krawchuck let me hand it in late."

"She's so nice. Thank goodness it wasn't Mrs. Richards, eh? Is she taking marks off?"

"She told me she'd forgive it being late if I handed my story in to her when it's done."

"Really! Are you going to?"

"Yeah. I figure if anyone's going to read it, she's the best person to give it to. She can probably give me lots of good advice."

"That's true. Do I still get to read it?"

"Of course. Your advice will be useful, too, just in a different way."

Louise finished at her locker and they headed towards class. "So, what did you do this book report on," Louise asked.

"Lloyd Alexander."

"The Prydain Chronicles?"

"Yup. *The Castle of Llyr.* "

"They're good, aren't they."

"Yeah. I haven't even read them all yet. I saw you reading *Taran Wanderer* and decided to look it up in the library, and I found the whole series. I'd read *The Book of Three* and *The Black Cauldron* a long time ago, but I didn't know there were any more."

"Oh, you have to read the last two. They're really good."

"I will. You know, it's funny, but there's a lot of stuff in my story that's a lot like Alexander: things like witches and swamps and towers, and wandering heroes, too, I guess. I wonder if I unconsciously remembered reading those books, and the ideas came into my story."

"That's a neat idea. But you know, heroes and swamps and towers are in almost all fairy-tale-kind of stories. Maybe they're sort of--I don't know--the building blocks of fairy tales. Do you know what I mean? Everyone uses them, but each in their own way."

"You mean, like there's always the same notes in a scale, but everyone makes different music out of them."

"Yeah. Like that."

"Wow. We should invent a new theory. The Louise and Kary Theory of Fairy Tales, etc. Think we could become famous?"

"Oh, for sure!" Louise laughed, and they went into class together, grinning.

That afternoon, as she walked home with Trevor, he asked if she was going to the Christmas dance.

"I wasn't planning on it," she replied. "I didn't have a whole lot of fun at the last one."

"Yes, but now we know each other, instead of neither of us knowing anyone. That ought to make a difference."

"I suppose." She grinned. "It's not a costume dance, is it?"

"Thank heavens, no!" he laughed. "So what do you say? Should we go? You know it would make both our mothers happy if we went to another dance together. Not that we'd be going 'together'," he added hastily, "just that we're both . . . "

"I know what you mean," Kary cut him off. She remembered what both Sonya and Megan had said about Trevor, and was anxious not to touch on that topic. "Maybe I'll see if Louise wants to go. Do you know her? You'd like her, anyway. And good old Norman. It's always more fun to go as a group."

"Good idea." They paused at the edge of the ravine. "Are we going down today?"

Kary hesitated. She hadn't been through the ravine since she had been given permission to write; somehow it seemed an unacceptable betrayal of the trust she had been given. "Not today, Trevor," she said. "I've got a lot of homework to do."

"Kary? Are you feeling all right?"

"Fine. I just can't go through the ravine today, that's all."

"Okay," Trevor said. "All right with me."

They walked over the bridge in silence. Kary could feel Trevor's confusion and felt badly for having been so abrupt. She didn't know what else to say, though. It wasn't the kind of thing Trevor would understand, she thought. His next words made her wonder if she was wrong.

"You know, I'm still trying to figure out a way to convince my mother that there's nothing wrong with the ravine," he said. "It's terrible to have to sneak around about something so silly."

"So have you come up with something?" Kary asked hopefully.

"No. But I'm still trying," he said in a martyr-like tone. "The inspiration will hit me one day, I know it will."

"Well, I'm counting on you," Kary laughed. "Once your mother's converted, mine will be a cinch, so hurry up and get inspired!"

"Aye, aye, comrade!"

Kary hoped Trevor would find a solution. She wanted to return to the ravine, to her clearing, but she wouldn't do it any more without permission. It felt so good to have her writing recognized and out in the open that she couldn't bear any longer to be sneaky about something equally important, like the clearing. Besides, she was learning how to be herself in other places besides the clearing--she could manage without actually going there until it, too, was recognized and allowed.

"See you later, then," she bid Trevor goodbye, wondering if the ravine could possibley mean as much to him as it did to her.

"Ciao."

There was Megan again, coming up the driveway. *Why does she always have to get home just when I'm saying goodbye to Trevor?* "Don't say anything," she warned her sister as she approached.

"About what?" Megan asked in feigned innocence. "The fact that you always walk home from school with Trevor Dohler? Why should I say anything about that?"

"Oh, cut it out. And whatever you do, don't say anything to Mom."

"Don't worry about Mom--she thinks it's cute."

"That's what I'm worried about!"

Megan had to laugh at that. "You're so cute, Kary. Don't ever grow up. You're too much fun this way."

"Die slowly."

"I am already."

"Oh, what a horrible thought!" their mother exclaimed, coming in on the end of the exchange. Both Megan and Kary had to laugh. "What's so funny?" their mother demanded.

"Don't worry about it, Mom," Kary said. "We were just kidding." She grinned at Megan as their mother went upstairs, forgetting that she was supposed to be mad at her sister. Megan grinned back, then kept grinning as she started to chant in a whisper,

"Kary and Trevor sittin' in a tree, . . . "

"Oh, I give up!" exclaimed Kary, escaping into her room. Sisters were impossible.

Chapter 14 -- The City, Again

When Deven and Tatania awoke the next morning, the sun was high in the sky and they were ravenously hungry. Deven wished he had thought to grab his sack before running from Ridach; even a bit of stale bread and mouldy cheese would be welcome now. But all he had was the flute that had been in his hand.

He played for Tatania, to distract their minds from their empty stomachs, and also to attract the notice of any fishermen that might be within hearing distance, for the sound of the flute would carry farther than a voice. Tatania sang when she knew the words to his tunes, and her voice would have melted ice, Deven thought. It was easy to forget being hungry when they were making such beautiful music together.

--I suppose that's a little clichéd, isn't it. Maybe I should forget all the romance stuff entirely: they don't have to fall in love. Oh, but they do. I just wish I knew how to do it.--

"Look!" Tatania cried, breaking off the song abruptly. "A sail."

They scrambled to their feet and began waving madly. The sail came closer and closer, until they could make out a figure in the boat who waved back at them. Deven thought there was something familiar about the fisherman, and as the boat drew near to shore he could see that indeed it was the same one who had brought him across the first time.

"Mag!" he called out happily.

"It is you, Deven," the fisherman replied. "I could have sworn I recognized that flute. But you have company I see. My lady," he greeted her, bowing.

"May we beg a ride back across the lake?" Deven asked politely, although he knew what the answer would be.

"Of course! Why do you think I've been fishing at this end of the lake for the past three days? But I fear I can't get any closer for the lady."

Tatania laughed and said, "I think I can handle getting my feet wet. After all, I've just spent a few weeks in a swamp!"

So Deven helped her through the water, and between him and Mag they managed to lift her into the boat, albeit somewhat ungraciously.

--I've always wanted to use "albeit" somewhere. Miss Krawchuck will be impressed!--

Deven formally introduced Princess Tatania to Mag the fisherman, and the journey back across the lake passed with much pleasant conversation and music making. Mag refused to listen to the tale of Tatania's rescue, much to their relief, since they didn't really want to tell it.

"I'll wait until it gets made into a ballad," he said, "and then I'll hear it some evening in a tavern with all my friends. Perhaps I'll even be in it," he grinned, and Deven assured him that he would be.

It was late afternoon by the time they approached Pavalis, and the waters were crowded with returning fishermen and people in pleasure boats out for the afternoon. Neither Mag nor his passengers said a word to any of the people they passed, but the people saw Tatania, and rumors began flying around the city. Mag sailed straight to the palace wharf, ignoring all the cries and excitement generated by their passage.

"Here you are, my lady," he said as he docked neatly alongside the carved wooden pier, sounding for all the world as though he had just taken her for a pleasant ride around the lake.

"Thank you so much, Mag," she replied. "If there is ever anything I can do for you, you have only to ask."

Deven leaped to the pier and helped Tatania out of the boat. Then he hesitated, not knowing whether to return to the boat or go on with the princess.

"You must come with me, Deven," Tatania said at once, seeing him hesitate. "If for no other reason than that my father will want to thank you personally."

So Deven bid farewell to Mag the fisherman and walked up the beautiful wooden pier towards another set of golden gates, with the princess on his arm. He was wet, muddy, and hungry, and he was sure he smelled like a swamp; the closer he got to the palace gates, the more uncomfortable he felt. Tatania sensed his uneasiness.

"Relax. I'm just as wet as you are--we make a fine couple, don't we! As soon as we greet my parents and let them know I'm safe we can both wash and change into clean clothes before we see anyone else. I promise."

The two guards at the gates let them in without a word, or even a raised eyebrow. They walked through the garden, Deven full of wonder at the vast array of beautiful flowers and trees that spread out on either side. Then they passed through another set of gates into the palace itself, and Deven winced as his shoes began making squelching noises on the marble floor. Tatania just grinned at him, for her shoes were squelching, too. After leading him through myriad arched corridors and up untold stairs, meeting only palace guards or servants who bowed towards the princess and carefully did not stare, she paused outside a small door in a long hall lined with tapestries. One guard stood by the door. Tatania spoke with him briefly, and he opened the door and slipped inside, leaving the two wet travellers waiting in the hall.

"I came up by the back way," Tatania explained. "That's why we didn't see anyone. This is my father's audience room. He's almost always here at this time of the day."

True to her word, the next person to emerge from the small doorway was King Arman himself. "My daughter!" he cried at once, and enveloped Tatania in a great hug. "You are safe! You're not hurt?" When she reassured him that she was perfectly fine, he told her to go at once to her mother, who was pining away in her room, fearing the worst.

"This is Deven," Tatania explained before she hurried away down the hall. "He rescued me. I'll see you again soon," she told Deven.

And Deven was left alone before the King of Caralisle. "Let me shake your hand," said the king, "as the man who rescued my daughter from who knows what fate. Stay," he held up his hand as Deven was about to speak. "Tell me nothing of what happened. The two of you can tell the story over dinner, which will be ready as soon as you are bathed and changed. I'm sure you are hungry!" He clapped his hands, and a servant appeared from around the corner. "Take this young man to a guest room, see that he is bathed and dressed in appropriate attire for an informal dinner." Turning back to Deven, the king told him," If you need anything, ask Rolf here. He'll help you."

Then the king returned to his audience chamber, and Deven was led away down more tapestried corridors and up more curving staircases. At last Rolf deposited him in what the king called a guest room, which was bigger than several woodcutter's cottages put together. Deven was left alone amidst the velvet and gold to take care of his needs.

--That's as close as they ever get in stories to saying people go to the bathroom.--

An hour later, feeling really clean for the first time since he had left home, Deven stood in front of the looking glass and surveyed his appearance. The clothes Rolf had laid out for him fitted perfectly. They were made out of soft, textured fabrics in rich blues and maroons such as Deven had never before seen, except perhaps at a distance the last time he was in Pavalis. He felt much more comfortable in his brown, homespun clothing, and yet, these clothes suited him somehow. He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin; then he laughed.

"Very princely, Deven!"

Just then Rolf knocked at the door. "Ready?" he asked. He no longer said "sir," after every phrase, because Deven had begged him not to, saying, "It makes me feel so foolish."

"I'm coming," Deven replied, adjusting the tunic one last time and heading out the door. Rolf started with surprize when he saw the transformed peasant boy.

"What's wrong?" asked Deven, with some concern. "Am I wearing something the wrong way?"

"Oh, no," Rolf replied. "Everything's on right. You just look very different in those clothes, that's all."

"I thought I looked quite noble, myself," Deven said jokingly.

"Noble, indeed," said Rolf, in a strange voice.

It wouldn't have meant so much to Deven except that he was about to see Tatania again, and the thought that she might consider him noble-looking made his stomach tingle.

"Oh, I'll never get it right! 'Made his stomach tingle.' Honestly!"

Megan was passing by Kary's room when Kary made this exclamation, and she stopped to see what was wrong.

"What can't you get right?"

"Oh, I want my two characters to fall in love with each other, but everything I write just sounds ridiculous."

"Try reading a romance: that should give you some ideas."

"No, no: I want them to fall in love, not lust after each other's tanned bodies."

Megan burst into laughter. "Well, don't look at me for help. I've never been in love. You're the one with the boyfriend!"

"Give it up, already! Oh well, I guess there's just no help for it but to be corny-sounding."

"Are you going to stay up all night writing? It's almost 10:00."

"I'm almost done. I want to finish it so I have time to recopy it and hand it in. There's only two more weeks of school left before Christmas."

"Speaking of which, do you have any idea what you're getting Mom and Dad for Christmas?"

"Not a clue. How about you?"

"Me neither. Should we go together again and get something decent?".

"Yeah. Let me know when you come up with something."

"Same goes for you; you're not getting away with letting me choose everything again!"

"All right, all right! As soon as I've handed in my story we'll go shopping. How's that?"

"Deal."

Megan went on to her room, and Kary turned back to her story. It was almost finished! Everything was falling into place for the final scene, when the truth would come out, and Deven would become . . . Ah, but she didn't want to get too specific about things; she just wanted the scene to carry itself through, revealing all its secrets in its own good time.

Rolf led Deven back through the hallways and into a small--by palace standards--dining room. King Arman was standing at the head of a long table, and on either side of him stood Tatania and an older woman who looked just like her and who must have been Queen Quelce. The Queen swept towards him in her long, rustling gown as soon as he came in.

"Deven, come here, let me see you!" She led him back towards the table as she effused over him, embarassing him completely with her fulsome praise. "I can't tell you enough how grateful we are to you."

"Deven, meet my mother," said Tatania, with the merest hint of a twinkle in her eye. Then Deven was free to turn and look at her, and his heart almost stopped. Her forest green gown brought out the roses in her cheeks, and the golden circlet in her hair reflected its highlights.

--Sounds like a shampoo commercial.--

The princess smiled at him, and his heart was lost forever. "Those clothes suit you, Deven," she said, sending his stomach into cartwheels.

"We're waiting for one more dinner guest before we begin," said the king, bringing Deven back into the present. "We've been entertaining the King of Denstmont for the last week, and he requested the pleasure of joining our celebration dinner. As soon as he arrives, dinner will be served."

As he spoke the words, the dining room door opened again and a tall, grey-haired man in simple, elegant clothes entered.

"King Cenam, welcome," said King Arman. The foreign monarch took his place opposite Deven, beside Tatania, and everyone sat down.

Immediately the food arrived, and for several minutes there was no conversation as Deven and Tatania took the edge off their hunger, and their elders politely let them eat. Deven had been worried about the meal, especially when he heard that he would be eating with not one, but two kings, but everyone was so gracious and kind that he was soon at ease. Between him and Tatania, they told the story of her capture by the witch and rescue by Deven's flute--a story that caused much consternation among the monarchs.

"After all," as King Arman put it, "no one has believed in magic for more than a hundred years. It's very difficult to accept that there are really witches about who put spells on things."

Once they were convinced that there really was no other explanation, they turned to Deven to hear how he had managed to be in the swamp in the first place. It was King Cenam that asked the question:

"And now you, Deven. You are a mystery to all of us. You must tell us who you are and what events led you to the Swamp of Sinmole."

Deven had felt the foreign king's piercing glance on him during the whole meal, and now he sensed a certain urgency behind this question. He wondered why he was so important to the king. "Well," he began, noticing Tatania's attention riveted on him as well *and feeling uncomfortable for the first time, "I wish I could answer your first question. But I don't know who I am."*

King Cenam leaned forward in his chair. Deven hesitated again, and then began to tell his story, just as he had told it to the Captain of the Guards. Then he told of his decision to look for the princess, and of his journey to the swamp. His listeners were filled with wonder at the tale. Tatania's eyes widened as she heard of the dangers he had faced. When he finished, there was a silence.

"Oh, Deven," murmured Tatania. "That's incredible."

King Cenam's comment surprised everyone. "You say your foster-father found you washed up on shore after a storm. What town was this in?"

Deven was taken off guard. "Your majesty, I don't recall that he said. I assume it would have been Merlis. That's the main town on the south coast."

Everyone looked at King Cenam for an explanation for his strange question. He acknowledged their curiosity, and began to tell a story of his own. "17 years ago, you may recall, Arman, I came here on a state visit, bringing my second eldest son, who was just an infant, to be betrothed to your third daughter."

--We'll make her the middle child too, just for Megan.--

The king and queen nodded with agreement, while Tatania started with surprise. She was the third daughter. King Cenam continued.

"Before we could make it to shore, we ran into a terrible storm. The ship was destroyed, I barely survived, and I assumed my child was drowned."

"Yes, I remember," said Queen Quelce. "What a terrible tragedy."

Deven still did not see where the king's story was going, but Tatania was getting more and more excited. "Go on," she said.

"This young man," the king pointed to Deven, "bears a remarkable resemblance to my other two sons. Having heard his story, I am almost convinced that he is the son I lost seventeen years ago."

Deven's jaw dropped open. This he had not expected. "But . . ." he said, falling silent when he could think of nothing to say.

"There is one thing that will prove your identity conclusively," the king continued, talking directly to Deven now. He pulled a ring off his baby finger. "Do you recognize this?"

Deven took the golden ring in his hand, staring at the pattern of intertwining leaves that encircled it. Wordlessly he pulled his own ring out of his shirt and showed it to the king.

"My son," whispered King Cenam. "Prince Teth."

Kary breathed a sigh of delight. At long last her hero achieved his quest, and what a noble ending to a noble journey it was. "Prince Teth. I don't know where that name came from, but it's right. Teth and Tatania. And they all lived happily ever after." But not yet. There was still a bit more to wrap up before she could put The End on it. Since it was past midnight, however, she decided to leave it for the next day.

"I'm almost finished!" Kary announced to Louise at school the next day.

"Almost finished what?" asked Lynne, coming up to them.

"Oh, just an extra project I'm doing for L.A., " Kary replied, careful not to look at Louise.

"I'd have figured you'd have enough extra work with all those math assignments," Lynne said, with some amazement.

"Nerd alert. Nerd alert." Oh, shut up. "You know, ever since that Parent Teacher night, Mrs. Richards hasn't given me any more 'extra assignments.' I guess my performance has 'improved significantly' enough for her."

"Thank goodness, eh? So now you're doing extra work for L.A. You're unbelievable!"

"Well, this one's mostly for fun," Kary tried to pass it off. *Yup, a definate Nerd Alert.*

"You know: " Louise put in, "some people like to spend their free time staying after school, making posters, phoning people, selling tickets; and some people like to curl up at home with a good book."

Kary smiled gratefully at Louise. Lynne grinned at the allusion to her Dance Committee activities.

"Speaking of which," she said, "are you guys going to the Christmas Dance?"

"Oh, I don't know," Louise hedged.

"Oh, Louise--I completely forgot--I was supposed to ask you if you wanted to come."

"To the dance?" Louise asked, surprised.

"Yeah. Do you know Trevor Dohler? He's in 7B." Louise shook her head. "Well, he lives not far from me; anyway, he figures we should get a bunch of people and all go together. So I said I'd talk to you."

Louise looked skeptical.

"That's a great idea," said Lynne. "Who else are you thinking of going with?"

"Oh, I don't know." Kary didn't want to mention Norman; he was hardly an indicator of popularity.

"I wish I could come with you, but I have to help set up and stuff. I'll be there, anyhow."

Kary suddenly didn't want to talk about the dance. She compared Lynne and all her chattering, involved friends with the little group of brains who didn't even know each other, and wondered if there was any point in going.

"So what's all this about going to the dance?" Louise asked after class, when they were alone.

"Oh, it's a long story." She realized that it was going to be difficult to explain Trevor without Louise jumping to the same conclusion as Sonya and Megan, and she wanted Louise of all people to understand it right. "Remember when I told you about the guy I met in the ravine, who also wasn't allowed to go there?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's Trevor Dohler. We started walking home from school together after that, since we live so close together. He's a lot of fun. I've been meaning to get you to meet him, but I never seem to see him at school." *Why didn't I ever tell her about Trevor? I hope she doesn't think I've betrayed her friendship. It's hardly being a bosom buddy to keep something like that a secret.*

But Louise didn't seem to be upset. She was just trying to figure out what all this had to do with the dance. "And he's the one that wants to go to the dance."

"Yes." *Oh, why is this so complicated?* "You see, we went to the Halloween Dance together--we didn't even know each other, our mothers arranged it all. It was very embarrassing, and I had a terrible time at the dance--which is why I never bothered to tell you that I went. I just felt too awful about it all."

"And now you want to go to another dance? You're not making any sense, Kary," Louise smiled helplessly.

"I'm getting to the point of all this, really I am. You see, after Trevor and I got to know each other, we talked about the dance and realized that the reason we had such a horrible time was that we didn't know anybody. So now that we know each other, and I know you, we could have fun if we went together."

"You made that all a lot more complicated than it really was," laughed Louise. "You're right, I'm sure: a dance would be fun if you knew other people who were there. I'll just have to ask my parents if I can go."

"Oh, good!" Louise's approval made the whole project seem a good idea again. "I was also thinking of asking Norman if he wanted to go. He was at the last dance, and he didn't have a great time, either."

"So what you're really asking me is if I'll go to a dance with a bunch of social misfits."

Kary's heart skipped a beat; then she realized that Louise was teasing her. "Who are you calling a social misfit?" she retorted, and all was right between them.

That night Kary finished her story.

Deven, or rather, Prince Teth, could not believe what was happening to him. A man he had never seen before was embracing him and calling him "son." The king and queen of his country were congratulating him and calling him a prince. Most amazing of all, the princess with whom he had fallen in love, whom he was sure he would never see again, was whispering to him that they were meant to be betrothed to one another.

"I knew it," she said, much later in the evening when the commotion surrounding her return and his discovery had died down and the two had a moment to be alone. "I knew I couldn't have fallen in love with just anybody. It was fated to be this way."

"Then," he hesitated, not wanting to put the unbelievable into words. "Then you love me, too?"

She turned her starry eyes towards his. She had no need to say a word. He bent his head towards her and gently, solemnly kissed her.

"Will you marry me?" he asked, and she said yes.

--Now that's not bad. Not bad at all. I think I could get the hang of this.--

The first thing Prince Teth did on the day after his discovery was to send a messenger to the woodcutter, asking him to come at once to the palace. Deven couldn't *wait to see the expression on his foster father's face when he found out who Prince Teth really was.*

The second thing he did was to ask formally for permission to marry Princess Tatania. This was granted immediately, and both kings were delighted that their plans of seventeen years ago were being fulfilled in this unexpected way. Preparations for a wedding went underway at once, and the whole country began to celebrate with holidays and festivals in honor of the betrothed couple.

So Prince Teth and Princess Tatania were married. Morag the sorceress appeared at the wedding to give them her blessing, astonishing everyone who still remained skeptical about witches and magic.

Her appearance became the crowning scene of the tales and ballads that immediately sprang up about Deven's adventures, just as Mag had predicted. Each version of the story was more elaborate and further from the truth than the last, and by the time Teth and Tatania were telling stories to their children, they could hardly recognize themselves in the tales. But they never forgot what really happened, and Prince Teth always remembered with pride that he had once been Deven, the woodcutter's son.

The End

Kary wrote the last two words with a decided flourish, taking up the rest of the page with curlicues surrounding the letters. It was the first time she had ever written those particular words with real intent, and she wanted to enjoy the experience to its utmost.

I'm done, I'm done, I'm done, she sang silently, grabbing Nestor and dancing around the room with him.

"Kary! You look happy," said her mother, passing by with the laundry.

"I am. I'm finished my story, at last."

"Well, congratulations. What are you going to do now?"

"First I have to recopy it, then I'll give it to Louise to see what she thinks of it, and then I'll give it to Miss Krawchuck."

"You'd better keep a copy for yourself."

"I suppose I should, but I hate recopying, and this is pretty long."

"You should ask your father if you can go use the computer at his school. Then you'd just have to type it in once, and you'd have as many copies as you like."

Kary hesitated. It was a good idea, but she was still uncomfortable mentioning her writing around her father. The less said, the better, at this stage in their relationship. "I don't know," she said, and her mother knew what she meant. "Besides, I can't type, so it would probably take three times as long."

"Whatever you think," her mother said, not pressing the issue.

"So, what do you want for Christmas?" Kary asked, changing the subject as she took the clean clothes her mother offered her.

"Oh, dear, I haven't really thought about it." She paused, seeming almost shy. "I wouldn't mind getting a copy of your story, if you wouldn't mind me reading it." Kary must have looked surprised, because her mother explained, "Brian once wrote me a song for Mother's Day. I still treasure that gift more than anything else I've gotten." She shook her head as if to dislodge the memory, and continued on to Megan's room.

Kary couldn't believe her mother would rather have her story than, say, a cookbook, or a new sweater. It wasn't as if it was going to be terrifically good. After all, it was the first substantial thing she'd ever written. *I wonder if she really thinks I'm talented, like Brian. I wonder if I am.*

It took her three days of doing nothing else in her spare time but recopying to finish the good copy of the story. When she was done, she was thoroughly sick of it and never wanted to see it again. She handed it to Louise at school with an expression of distaste.

"Here. Take it; I hate it."

"Oh, you do not," Louise replied, and it was true: she didn't. She watched Louise put the manuscript in her folder with a sudden pang of anxiety, as if she were watching her child leave for his first day of school.

"Be nice to it," she entreated her friend. "But do tell me what you think. Can you read it by tomorrow? I really want to get it in to Miss Krawchuck."

"No problem," said Louise.

So Louise read Kary's story, and the next day she told an unbelieving but secretly thrilled Kary that she loved it.

"It's great; it really is. It sounds just like something from a book of fairy tales, or from a fantasy novel."

"Do you really think so, or are you just saying that?"

"I really think so. You wait and see what Miss Krawchuck says. You'll see."

So Kary handed her story in to Miss Krawhcuck. And there was nothing else to do after that. A great weight was removed from her, but at the same time she felt empty, purposeless. The clearing in the center of her soul was vacant once again. Luckily it was Christmas time, and there was Christmas shopping to do, and a dance to get ready for, and all kinds of general holiday bustle to take up the time Kary had previously spent writing, so she didn't feel too lost. But a part of her was still with her story, still anxious to know its fate.

Trevor, Louise, Norman and Kary went to the Christmas Dance on the last day of classes, and had a wonderful time. Kary hadn't known how fun dancing could be, and how it made you forget everything except how much fun you were having. She didn't have time to worry what anyone else was thinking about the "nerd group," because the nerd group spent all its time laughing and drinking punch and trying to talk above the level of the music--that is, when they weren't all on the dance floor dancing around in a circle. By the end of the night there were at least four or five other people joining their dancing circle during each song: the group seemed to generate energy and laughter, and others caught on. Kary felt at last as though she were at the center of something; as the circle of swaying, bouncing bodies grew bigger, she felt herself expanding, extending to encompass the whole dance floor, filling up with all of the fun in the world.

"You know, Louise," she said late in the evening, when the two were taking a breather in the hallway, "I feel the way I feel when my writing is going really well: it's as if I'm plugged in to something, and I'm getting fuller and fuller until it just has to spill out."

"I think I know what you mean. I feel like I have magic in me, and if I spin around it will scatter over everything. Like this." She pirouetted down the hallway, and they laughed until their sides ached.

"So, what happens after it all spills out," Louise said, when she had her breath back again."

"I suppose we'll feel really empty," replied Kary. "Tonight, I think I'm just going to go to sleep!"

"And it will all go into our dreams, so it won't really be lost at all, will it? All the magic, I mean."

"No, I don't think magic can ever really disappear," agreed Kary. "It always changes you somehow. Just think: we'll never be the same two people again!"

"So come and dance while you still can," concluded Trevor, who just came up at the end of the conversation. And they did.

The next day Kary slept in until past noon, and was awakened by magic of quite a different sort.

"Santa's elves are out early this year," announced her mother, coming into her room with a brightly wrapped package. "This was in our mailbox this morning, and it's addressed to you."

Kary rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and examined the package. It was from Miss Krawchuck. "Can I open it?" she asked her mother.

"It's up to you. Why don't you at least get dressed first. It will wait that long."

Kary showered and dressed, and even made her bed, before she allowed herself to open Miss Krawchuck's present. What could it be? It looked and felt like two or three magazines wrapped together. Perhaps it was a subscription to something. Impatient with guessing, Kary tore open the paper.

It was three magazines wrapped together, three copies of the same magazine. Well, not really a magazine: it was a creative writing journal, "published to showcase the talents of junior and senior high school students across the city," as the cover explained. Puzzled as to why Miss Krawchuck would have given her three copies, Kary opened to the table of contents.

"Christmas contest issue," it announced. "Winners in each of the age and subject categories. Junior High students: Short story: 'The Lost Prince,' by Kary Hill."

Kary was halfway through the next line before it sank in. *The Lost Prince, by Kary Hill? Winner, Junior High short story?* Then she noticed the letter stuck between the pages of the journal.

"Dear Kary,

I have taken a liberty that perhaps I should not have, but I used the Christmas season as an excuse: I did so want to surprise you. I entered your story in the Student's Journal contest. I did so only because I was quite sure it would be the best in its category, and I felt others deserved to read it too. I'm delighted to see that I was right. Before you panic, don't worry: I made very few editorial changes. I had to guess what title you would have wanted for it, and it's probably not right at all, so for that I apologize. I will understand if you are angry with me for doing this without your consent, but I hope at the very least you will experience a thrill at seeing your words in print. It is a thrill I think you will have many more opportunities of experiencing.

Yours sincerely,

Elaine Krawchuck"

"Thrill," was hardly the word to describe Kary's emotions as she opened the journal to the beginning page of her story. There, in black and white, were the words she had struggled over, the images she had striven after, the emotions she had grappled with. It was so far removed from its source, here on these professional white pages, with the professional typing, justified on both sides, that it hardly seemed like hers any more. And yet, as she started reading, she entered the same place she had always entered--it was still there, the Caralisle she had discovered and loved, in between all those precise black and white lines were the same hills, the same fresh air, the same smell of bacon sizzling--and it was wonderful!

I wrote this? she wondered. She looked out at the magical white world outside her window, at the festive mountain ash that seemed to be celebrating the day with its bright berries, at the blue sky that shone with brilliant sunshine. It was all real. She pinched herself to make sure she was still real, and she was. So she began reading the story written by Kary Hill as if she had never seen it before, savoring its every moment. Caralisle at last was real, too.

"What'cha reading?" asked Megan, stopping by Kary's room on her way downstairs.

"My story," Kary replied, smiling with joy.

Epilogue

Christmas morning. Soft lighting glowing red and green and blue, twinkling between the golden tinsel; parcels full of secrets about to be opened; Christmas oranges and chocolates in everyone's stockings; anticipation shining from everyone's eyes and escaping from the corners of their mouths.

Christmas belongs with fairy tales, Kary decided. *It's a different color, but it's the same magic.*

"Well, time to eat breakfast," her father said, as he said every Christmas morning after the stockings were emptied.

"Nooo!" cried Megan and Kary, as they always responded. "Let's open the presents first."

"Presents--bah humbug!" he retorted, as usual.

"But you have to see what I got you," said Megan, varying her response from the tradition.

"That's a new one," their mother commented.

"Do you think it means we're growing up if we're more excited about what we're giving than what we're getting?" Kary asked. For she shared Megan's eagerness to see how everyone would like their presents. She had a few extra special gifts to give this year. Megan, too, seemed to have something a little different up her sleeve. She had been acting very secretive and excited in the last two weeks.

"Well, since you don't care about getting presents, we can go eat breakfast first," their father was saying.

"Forget it!" they cried, and they won, of course.

The gifts were opened one by one, with appropriate oohs and ahs and thank yous and you-shouldn't-haves. They all laughed at the humorous plaque Megan got for their father to hang in his office, they modeled the clothes and jewelry and ties they got, and they spent a lot of time looking at the delicious pictures in mom's new cookbook

In the middle of it all Kary tore open her present from her father, and stopped as she saw what it was: a beautifully bound book of blank pages. "For your writing," was the inscription inside. She looked up at her father, who was trying to look nonchalant about it.

"Thanks, Dad," she said. "It's beautiful." She didn't say anything else, but they understood each other. Her mother was smiling at them with tears in her eyes, expressing enough emotion for both of them.

Then the present opening continued as before, except, perhaps, that there was a slightly warmer feeling among all the participants. At last the pile under the tree dwindled to a few presents meant for friends and relatives. But it wasn't over yet. Megan was still full of her secret, and Kary hadn't bestowed her final gifts.

"Wait," she said, when it looked like everything was over and their father could finally have his breakfast.

"Still more gifts?" her mother exclaimed, as Kary brought out the three packages she'd hidden under the couch. They were all identical, but she'd written something different in each one, so she was careful to give each to the right person.

"You can all open them at once," she said.

There were puzzled looks on everyone's faces as they tore off the wrapping to reveal the cover of the Student Journal.

"Open it up," Kary urged. Light dawned on their faces one by one as they read her name in the table of contents.

"Oh, Kary!" her mother cried, giving her a hug. "How wonderful for you! This is the best present I could have gotten."

"Yeah, this is really terrific. Thanks, Kary," said Megan, sounding almost as if she were honored by the gift.

"We're proud of you, Kary," her father said, and Kary felt warm all over. Just as she was about to get uncomfortable with all the praise, the phone rang.

"I'll get it," she said, jumping up.

"Who could that be?" her mother wondered.

"Merry Christmas," Kary said into the phone.

"Is that you, Kare?" came a familiar voice.

"Brian!" Kary exclaimed. The room froze.

"Tell Megan her friend's friend's cousin finally got through to me," said Brian, explaining everything. Kary grinned at Megan.

"Merry Christmas, everyone," Megan said.

"Oh, Brian," said Kary, "we're so glad you called. How are you?"

"I'm doing pretty good. How about yourself?"

"I finished your story," Kary said, that being the most urgent thing she wanted to tell him. "You remember the one?"

"With the princess in the tower? Sure I remember. How does it end?"

Kary grinned into the phone. "They lived happily ever after, of course."

The End